



C3

—シーキューブ—
Cube×Curse×Curious

VIII

水瀬葉月
Illustration ちろりがため



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みなせ はづき

水瀬葉月

写真はボードゲームに興じる作者の姿……と言いたいところですが、その実はこの文のことを締切当日の深夜に思い出したため仕方なく一人で駒のフリをして遊んでいる作者の姿。違います、いつも一人でこんなサビシイ遊びをしてるわけじゃないんです。ちゃんと他の人と一緒に遊ぶこともあるんです、ホントですよ？

【電撃文庫作品】

結界師のフーガ1～3 ぼくと魔女式アポカリプス1～3

C³-シーキューブC³-シーキューブ-IIC³-シーキューブ-IIIC³-シーキューブ-IVC³-シーキューブ-VC³-シーキューブ-VIC³-シーキューブ-VIIC³-シーキューブ-VIII

イラスト: さそりがため

今回はサンタ服で表紙もカラーページも真っ赤！
自然と派手になってくれて嬉しいです。
赤い色を見ているとお腹が空きますね、ぐう。

Cube×Cursed×Curious

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



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C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



や ち はる あき
夜知春亮

フィア&このとは同居中の夜知家家主。サンタの存在を信じ切っているフィアに真実を如何に伝えるかが最大の悩み？

むら まさ
村正このは

今まさにこぼれんとする眼鏡っ娘。無敵のアピールポイントを遺憾なく発揮予定!!

「さーん、おめでとうー!」

フィア

初体験のクリスマスにおおはしゃぎのおせんべ大好き銀髪少女。

Scene01:夜知家の聖夜の過ごし方

服の下には誰にも知られてはならない秘密を隠したクラス委員長さん。でも今回はサンタ服でサービスです♡

「こんな日は……なん？」

「おめでとう！ クリスマス快乐をねらておどりー」

北条銃音
&北条漸音


大秋高校のサボり保健
医姉&有能秘書妹。

にんぎょう はら くら え
人形原黒絵

こう見えて20歳設定の美人美容師さん。商店街振興のために一肌脱ぎます☆

「...909-07-004」俊

Scene02: 祝祭の夜



ン・イゾー
《闇曲拍明の研究室長国》
に所属する少女……だが、各
所が危ういサンタさんにな
っているのには深い事情
がある訳で……。

「新たな未知が既知になりました」

「かは、何でユウくんがなの？」

ココロ・
ペンタンジェリ
赤い服に赤い風呂敷包み
を担いだ「サンタさん」？
夜空を飛び交う彼女の目
的は……？

Scene03:等しく聖夜は訪れる

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エピローグ



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Illustration さそりがため



Prologue

Part 1

Haruaki was returning to his room after a bath when he heard suspicious noises inside. With his hand reached out, just about to open the door, he froze his posture.

"If I remember right, it should be around here..."

"Hmm... Let's make the most of this chance..."

A team of two thieves, apparently. Their voices sounded very familiar.

(What are these two doing...?)

Haruaki quietly looked into the room through the gap in the sliding door—When arresting thieves, it was best to catch them in the act.

Two figures could be seen inside the room. One was a petite girl whose unique silver hair swayed—Fear—while the other was a black-haired girl who was even more petite—namely, Kuroe. The two of them were tiptoeing around, ransacking his closet's top shelf in search of something. That compartment should not contain anything other than clothing like underwear or socks.

"We can't be found out and it must be used at night..."

"I know."

"Hey, Ficchi, how about this one?"

"Hmm... Not bad, I'm imagining it... Really big... Will it fit inside...?"

More fragments of mutterings could be heard. Haruaki gulped. Incomprehensible. What were these two girls talking about? What were they planning to steal his underwear for?

(Can't be found out... Must be used at night... Also, can't fit something really big... W-What are these images in my mind...?)

Haruaki gulped again, still unable to comprehend. Or rather, comprehension felt like it would be too dangerous. Perhaps because his chaotic emotions spread to his fingertips, the sliding door shook slightly. In the next instant, Kuroe turned her head back abruptly.

"Hmm—someone suspicious!"

"Y-You two are the suspicious ones!"

He hesitated for an instant. Since he was discovered, it could not be helped, so he entered the room.

"What are you doing? Even if you search my closet, you're not going to find anything interesting..."

"Even if you ask what we're doing... Eh?"

"Umuu. Th-This is all your fault!"

Totally unabashed and unperturbed, the two girls exchanged glances. That was not all. Fear also puffed out her chest with displeasure.

"That's way too mean of you. To think you'd hide the truth from me for so long... Had I known before the fact, I'd have prepared properly! Given the situation now, all I can do is borrow that really big thing of yours!"

"No wait, I'm totally lost here. What are you talking about?"

Haruaki frowned and questioned in return. Fear pouted even more as she waved the spoils of her victory in her hand—namely, Haruaki's sock—and said:

"By this point, why are you still trying to play dumb!? Isn't it obvious? I'm talking about the wonderful upcoming festival—Christmas! Kuroe told me everything already!"

Christmas. Sock. Somehow, Haruaki felt unsettled by a subtly different premonition compared to just now.

Half narrowing his eyes, he groaned and asked:

"What... do you know...?"

"Of course, I know about how interesting and fun Christmas is. Most importantly, I heard that there's a man called Santa Claus who'll give presents to us on this day! He supposedly sneaks presents into people's socks beside their pillows. Although that sounds a bit perverted to me, given the case, of course the sock should be as big as possible. Compared to mine, your socks are definitely bigger... Hey, are you listening?"

Haruaki had stopped listening halfway. Creak creak creak—Haruaki turned his head stiffly and looked at the culprit who had imparted Fear with troublesome information.

Kuroe smiled tenderly and returned his gaze with a meaningful look that seemed to be saying "You understand, right?"

Did she mean this? What every parent in the world agonized about... The challenge of "when should I reveal the truth of Santa Claus to my child?" had finally descended upon him as well. Clearly this was something inconsequential, but why did he feel so troubled by it?

Haruaki switched their location to the living room, sighing as he sipped tea from his cup. Fear buried herself in the kotatsu^[1], humming a song as she rapidly surfed through television channels with the remote control. In the end, the sock was taken directly back to Fear's room. Haruaki could not bear himself to stop her because of the same reason that made him troubled about revealing the truth of Santa Claus.

(Hmm~ Seeing her so enthusiastic, I really don't want to ruin her fun...)

To think you'd create this troublesome situation for me—Haruaki glared resentfully at Kuroe, but of course, she simply drank her tea nonchalantly.

Just at this moment, the glasses-wearing girl with twin braids—Konoha—entered the living room. Haruaki had called her when he was brewing tea, but she had responded: "R-Right now happens to be a bad time, I'll be over shortly!" She was staying cooped up in her room until now.

"Phew... Ah, is there any tea remaining?"

"Oh, of course. When you said it was a bad time, were you doing homework?"

Haruaki asked carelessly but Konoha put up an unnatural smile of courtesy for some reason and replied:

"Eh? A-Ahaha. P-Pretty much?"

"We haven't even had the end of term ceremony and you're already working on the winter break homework? Amazing... Oh, Konoha, there's a bit of yarn sticking to your sleeve."

"!? W-WHEERREE~!"

"W-Why are you suddenly yelling vigorously like that? Why?"

The instant Haruaki pointed to the yarn adhering to her sleeve, whoosh! Konoha moved fast enough to leave afterimages behind. Grabbing the yarn and pinching it tight, she applied sharpness to her hand and shredded it completely, then dunked the remains into the trash can in one swift and flowing motion. Finally returning to formal sitting posture in seiza before the kotatsu, she tilted her head as though saying "Hmm? Did something happen just now?" while presenting Haruaki a lovely smile.

"..."

"What's the matter? There's nothing going on with me. Oh dear~ Homework must be completed as early as possible, it's homework after all. This whatever yarn is completely irrelevant. It just happened to be sticking onto me. It's 100% certain that I'm not making something out of yarn, so please disregard it completely. Haruaki-kun, you won't let it weigh on your mind, right? So let's change the subject. Just now, there was a commotion in your room, what happened? I seem to have heard voices talking about socks or something."

"Hmph hmph, Cow Tits. How utterly foolish! Judging from the tone of your voice, you seem to be oblivious to the importance of socks during this time of the year? For the sake of containing really big presents, a really big sock is needed... Oh no, I nearly presented a gesture of humanity to my enemy. Hmph hmph, in any case, all you're going to get is a chunk of meat stuffed into your sock at most...!"

"Y-You mean presents? As impossible as it may sound, you wouldn't happen to believe that Santa Claus is real—"

Crap! Haruaki thought to himself. Evidently, he was not the only one either.

"Ah choo—!"

"Kyah, what are you doing, Kuroe-san!? Why did you suddenly... Mmff mmff mmff..."

Yelling strangely, Kuroe pounced and pushed Konoha down. Covering Konoha's mouth with her fingers, she said:

"Kono-san, hold on. Please~ hold on. Uh... I feel so cold. Even the kotatsu is not enough to help me endure the cold, so I hope to use your fantastic

body, which I've coveted for so long, to help warm me up! Hug me hug me, hold me hold me."

"...Pwah! Wait... What does that have anything to do with covering my mouth...!? Hey, nngghh, please stop pressing on my face and turning it from side to side!"

"Don't ask, don't ask. Anyway, let's end the topic here. Otherwise, regarding your yarn mystery just now, Konon-sana, that secret you wish to keep safe until at least the day after tomorrow, I may very well let slip my deductions right here..."

"!? Th-That's so underhanded... Ahhh... I-I get it, okay! Like I said already, I get it!"

Konoha panted and finally escaped from Kuroe's sexual harassment attack with much difficulty. Haruaki could not understand the situation but it looked like Konoha was not going to tell Fear about the truth of Santa anymore. With a stiff smile, Konoha concurred extremely without enthusiasm:

"Cough. Yes, after all, it's Christmas. Yes yes, socks are needed. Socks."

"Hmph, so Cow Tits finally realized it? Whatever... When the day arrives, we must decide the victor by seeing who receives the best Christmas present."

"When did it suddenly become a competition...?"

Ignoring Konoha's remark, Fear pressed the remote and changed channels. The screen showed a news program. At this moment, Fear's eyes were suddenly shrouded in a layer of gloom:

"That said... Hey, Haruaki. There's one thing, Should I describe it as worrying... Or rather, it bothers me."

"What is it?"

Fear continued to watch the news without looking at Haruaki. Quietly, she asked:

"For someone non-human like me... Santa Claus... Will he really visit me...?"

The answer was decided already. Haruaki shifted his gaze from Fear's profile to the television screen and answered softly:

"Of course he will, right?"

"R-Really?"

"Yeah. See, he even visits bears. Of course he'll come."

The news was showing images from a certain zoo. Wearing a Santa hat, a bear was ravenously eating a sumptuous vegetable cake. 'Looks like Tsuyoshi-kun has already received his Christmas present early' was narrated in the background.

"W-Wow... I see now...!"

Perhaps because the bear looked adorable or she found Haruaki's words convincing, Fear's eyes recovered their liveliness as she leaned forward to stare at the television. Then she suddenly discovered everyone's gaze focused on her.

"R-Really... Hmm, you're right, that's only natural! He'll surely come... However, oh right, he might not visit you! Because Santa only appears by the pillow of good boys and girls, right? But you're a shameless brat after all!"

"Haha, who knows. Although I'm actually not shameless, I probably won't get a visit."

That bastard Old Pops doing something that considerate? Impossible. Although it was not as if Haruaki had never received a present ever, with that guy running off to places unknown, expecting a present would too much of a delusion, right?

(Even if he transferred just a little more money for living expenses, I'd be very happy... Sigh, it's impossible. Say, since I'm currently the master of the house and I feel quite indebted to these girls' care for me... Should I prepare Christmas presents...? How much money do I have left in the emergency stash...?)

"..."

Fear was frowning and looking down as though going "Crap!" Perhaps she was bothered by Haruaki saying that he probably was not going to be

visited by Santa Claus? Just as Haruaki frantically tried to comfort her:
"After all, I'm already used to not receiving any presents, don't worry"—

Judging from Fear's face, she seemed to have thought of something as she suddenly looked up.

"Muu, muuu, I see. Hmm... Don't give up hope! Perhaps Santa might make a delivery mistake or have mercy on you, so you end up receiving a present after all, right? Mufu!"

"What are you going mufu for!? You're not planning some sort of weird idea, right?"

"O-Of course I'm not planning some sort of weird idea. Don't worry about it! So... If that's the case, it really can't be helped. Then the issue left is... money after all...?"

Fear muttered incomprehensibly while she watched the animal show that came up after the news.

"I know right? Perhaps Santa Claus might very well show extra mercy~ It's too early to assert that Haru won't receive any presents. Am I right, Kono-san?"

"Eh...! I-Is that so? I... Umm, I'm not sure either! Really, positive!"

Kuroe was smiling intriguingly while Konoha continued to smile stiffly. Despite their suspicious behavior, Haruaki decided to pay them no mind since he was busy trying to remember how much money he had in his secret stash.

Just at this moment, a bizarre noise was heard in the living room but it was not the background music of the animal show on television. Transcribed exactly, it sounded like this: "Gufuoo...!" "To think my ambition would end here...!" "Damn you, contemptible warriors of the light—" "Evil-doing humans, you are the culprits responsible for destroying everything!" A series of mysterious lines. What were they?

"Oh, excuse me. That's my phone."

"What on earth is that ringtone!?"

"A collection of Demon Lord final death cries from all times and places. Whenever someone calls, it allows me to relive those thrilling moments of accomplishment when finishing an RPG~ Isn't that great?"

Truly too avant-garde. Haruaki decided to refrain from commenting.

Next, Kuroe took out her cellphone and tilted her head:

"An unrecognized phone number. Who could it be...? Hello~ Uh, Yamada-san...? Oh, the cake shopkeeper, how are you~?"

Kuroe nodded repeatedly as she listened to the speaker on the other side. After a while, she cocked her head again and asked in a very incredulous voice:

"...A part-time job?"

While Fear was staring intently at the television, her ear seemed to twitch once as though some sort of weird idea was going through her mind.

Part 2

"Oh man~ So exhausting. Jeez... Why would anyone build a house this deep in the mountains?"

A blond young man was dressed in construction overalls. After bumping up and down along the mountainous roads, he unloaded equipment from the truck at the destination while grumbling. Dressed in the same work clothes, his senior colleague scolded him:

"Idiot, what if the client hears you? In this current recession, you've got to be thankful for any work at all. This is a long-awaited and major client whose job will take quite a few weeks to complete."

"...You're right."

The young man casually unloaded bricks from the truck and piled them up, meanwhile glancing at the house that served as the site for the current job. The more he looked, the stranger he felt. This was a decrepit western mansion that was completely out of place in the calm and peaceful mountain environment. Due to the excessive sense of dissonance, it even gave off an impression as though the house was added as an afterthought, simply dumped here at this location by coincidence.

The work order was also quite strange. The request was to simply repair the house, which was not exactly the same as "making this derelict house livable." The damage distribution was also completely skewed and irregular. Shattered windows, crumbling brick outer walls, several thick

pillars had disappeared from beneath the eaves—On the other hand, the other walls and windows were virtually intact. What kind of lifestyle could cause the house to come to this state? Then—

"Ah, welcome everyone. So sorry to be troubling you today as well!"

"Oh, good morning! We will be working our hardest as usual today. If you have any questions or requests, please feel free to let us know!"

Probably having heard the truck's arrival, the client came out of the house. After an exchange of pleasantries with the elderly man in charge, she lowered her head and bowed timidly before going back into the house. This client was also quite peculiar—a girl in a sailor-style school uniform with fresh plaster casts on both of her hands. If one did not call this strange, what else could describe the situation? Out in the mountainous wilderness, living alone in this weird house. For what unusual circumstances or reasons would anyone stay in this kind of place...

"Hey, stop standing there and spacing out! Get to work now! Move it!"

"...Yeah."

But one thing was for certain, furthering pondering would be meaningless. The young man had no interest in finding out in the first place. He simply wanted to escape reality. Scolded by his colleague, the blond young man spat by his feet and slowly started his work.

Then after some time had passed, he saw a visitor arrive. Watching the girl enter the house directly without even knocking at the door, he thought: Seriously, strange people do end up attracting other strange people.

"...What fashion sense. Isn't that getup really like a Santa's?"

With her hands immobilized in casts, only her fingertips could move. But this posed no hindrance to Ontenzaki Satsuko's daily life.

After the water boiled, the gas stove's dial instantly turned off. The cupboards opened themselves. A set of newly bought teacup and saucer floated lightly through the air and landed on the table. Even though this was a supernatural scene that would cause any other person to scream, Satsuko remained calm and composed. She simply watched as a teabag was placed into the cup while the kettle floated in midair as it poured boiling water.

Just at this moment, Satsuko cocked her head. Clearly, more water still needed to be poured, but the kettle's movements suddenly froze. Then—from somewhere, an anxious voice whispered into her ear.

"Satsuko... Satsuko!"

"Fourt, what's the matter?"

She asked the voice coming from the air. Hovering in midair, the kettle shook intensely nonstop.

"That blond man... The human outside. Kill him. If you can't do it, I'll take care of him. May I kill him?"

"W-What are you talking about~? It wasn't easy to find those people who are willing to fix up the house... Did anything happen?"

"Not just anything happened! Than man...! He spat! Inside me!"

"...Awww~ That's really inappropriate~ But then, if you kill the workman, the progress of repairs will be even slower~ Satsuko will remind them later but please endure for now..."

"Muu..."

Leaking a moan, the kettle shook again. But without notice, its movements suddenly stopped again. In the next instant, the cup and the spoon on the table all floated into the air.

"W-Wah~! I already said no, come on and endure it!"

"Not that! Satsuko—An intruder! Be careful!"

While Fourteen was speaking, the entrance at the living room was rudely pushed open. Entering the door from outside was—

"Buon giorno! It's been a while, Satsuko. Are you discussing about killing someone? Need my help?"

"Kokoro-senpai!?"

A beautiful girl was dressed almost monochromatically. Her bold words and attitude stood in stark contrast to her appearance as she approached with great strides. Then suddenly with great affection, she embraced Satsuko.

"Oh~ Oh~ You're just as small as before! I heard you were injured... Kaha, since your arms are still attached, that's not too bad after all. Hurry up and get better. Get better."

"Y-Yes. You look like you're living well too..."

In actual fact, she was definitely not someone who would be considered tall. Compared to Satsuko, she was only a couple centimeters taller—But that was how she always acted and Satsuko accepted her hug with a smile.

"Oh right, your «Blaze» rank dropped from seventh to ninth because you were defeated, right? What a shame~ You were clearly so close to becoming one of the «High Singles». But simply from the fact that you didn't drop to the double digits, it's obvious that the Commander still sees potential in you. Don't get too depressed. Try harder!"

"Y-Yes... Although Satsuko doesn't know how far someone weak like her can try hard..."

"Kaha, you're still the same like that. Don't worry~ Don't you have a reliable partner? ...Oh, sorry, I forgot to say hi! How are you doing, Fourteen?"

"...Greetings, «Blaze» No.4, Pentangeli-dono."

A muttering voice responded from the air. Kokoro stopped hugging Satsuko and shrugged in an exaggerated manner.

"Aren't you formal as always? I've wondered since a long time ago, do you happen to find me troublesome? Kaha, how heartbreaking! Can't you greet me in a more friendly manner? If you're unwilling, then I'll have to make a move first."

Saying that, she suddenly opened a curtain within arm's reach. Hugging the window frame, she pressed her cheek and rubbed against the window.

"Eee—Eyah! What... are... you doing in this kind of... naked spot... Nngghh... S-Stop it... This... is so embarrassing...!"

"On the other hand, I don't find it embarrassing. Next, lemme see... What should I do? How about some licking~"

"Eyah... I-I get it, I get it, okay! W-Welcome, Kokoro-senpai...!"

"Wouldn't it have been nice if you said that at the start? Oh, excuse me, Satsuko, could you brew me a cup of tea please? Running all the way here was really exhausting."

"Oh, yes, of course! Please sit, please sit. Have a seat and wait~"

She asked Fourteen to bring out another teacup. Controlling the poltergeists, Fourteen restarted her tea brewing and shortly after, two portions of tea were prepared on the table. Kokoro was sitting boldly on her chair with one knee drawn up. Although her underwear was visible, Satsuko knew that reminding her was useless. So in any case, she pretended not to see and took a seat opposite to Kokoro.

"So... What brings you all the way out here, Kokoro-senpai?"

"Oh dear, there's actually nothing special. I just thought I'd say hi since I happen to be visiting Japan. Also, since you're the predecessor after all, I wanted to ask for your thoughts after the battle. It should be quite interesting."

"Uh... In other words, Kokoro-senpai, you've also arrived to fight Fear-san and her friends?"

Kahaha—Kokoro's shoulders shook from her laughter.

"It's Fear-in-Cube. Yes, I've already obtained authorization to make a move on those guys, even though that's not my only purpose for coming here. In fact, there's an even more interesting fellow compared to them. I received news that the target will be coming to this town... Due to over anticipation, I arrived early. Next, I plan on making various preparations while I'm waiting."

"Oh~ If you say so, it must be a very interesting person, right? What kind of cursed tool does the opponent possess? Or is it a cursed tool with human form~?"

"No, a real, living person. According to the in-house combat analysis team, possessing power comparable to the «High Singles» despite a body of flesh and blood, a master of the strongest level... Just from the sounds of that, I can hardly wait!"

Finishing the tea in the cup, Kokoro then added with a smile as though suddenly inspired:

"—However, master seems to be a slightly misleading choice of words, eh? Kaha!"

"Really..."

If someone were really strong, does that not make them a master?
Satsuko was completely baffled.

Unable to understand the meaning of Kokoro's words or why she was laughing, Satsuko could only respond vaguely while gazing blankly with her head inclined in puzzlement.

Chapter 1 - Flight in Progress, Will He Crash? / "Santa Claus is coming to town"

Part 1

December 22, a few hours after the end of term ceremony...

Due to Christmas Eve coming in two days, the shopping street was uniformly Christmas in mood. Countless discount banners stood upright on the street with shiny and extravagant decorations all around. Naturally, the cake shop before Haruaki's eyes was no exception. In front of the shop, a small tent and long table were set up with a state of battle preparedness unique to the Christmas season. Nothing was lacking: decorations for drawing people's attention, miniature Christmas trees, Jingle Bells playing from a CD deck, the main attraction: a small mountain of cake, as well as—

"Nuoooh, my legs are feeling colder than expected! Isn't this skirt a bit too short?"

"I'm more concerned about my exposed shoulders... Isn't this... a bit too... erotic...?"

"What, shoulders? Shoulders are completely unimportant. Shouldn't you pay more attention to that pair of cow udders instead? Isn't the top part of the breasts about to pop out? Wow, to think you can nonchalantly display to the public that mass of strange, ugly, repulsive and flabby flesh, how completely unbelievable! This is so excessively shameless that I'm inspired with newfound respect for you... If I were you, I'd surely feel so ashamed that I'd instantly bite through my tongue to commit suicide. You're absolutely amazing."

"I-I'm not nonchalant at all! I wouldn't wear this if I had a choice, but this is the only outfit, there's nothing I can do!"

—As well as, salesladies dressed in Santa outfits.

Obviously, they were Fear and Konoha. They were wearing red hats tipped with fluffy white balls, red clothes and red boots. Just as Konoha complained, only hers was a one-piece Santa dress with exposed shoulders. As for Fear, she was wearing thigh-high boots. Despite certain points of dissimilarity, these were undoubtedly Santa outfits.

Haruaki really wished they would stop arguing out in the public like it were business as usual... Wearing the cake shop's apron, Haruaki could not help but roll his eyes at them. At this point, the two girls' gazes suddenly turned towards him. Without saying a word, they seemed to be trying to ask him something through their eyes. Haruaki instantly shuddered while thinking up an answer:

"Uh... Umm... I-It's very fitting. Suits you both..."

"H-Hmph hmph, that goes without saying. Although I only learned of his existence recently, more than anyone else, I understand and respect the altruistic man known as Santa Claus. How could someone like me not suit this outfit!?"

"Ehehe... I-Is that so? Although it's quite embarrassing, so be it... Hmm, since this is a part-time job after all, persistent grumbling isn't going to help. I will do my best!"

Apparently, Haruaki picked the right answer. Just as he breathed a sigh of relief, a third Santa girl jumped out of the cake shop.

"Haru, what about me~?"

"O-Oh, it suits you too... Wait a sec, I thought you were just showing up briefly to instruct us? Don't you have your own shop to attend to?"

"Of course. Next, I'm going to return to the 'Dan-no-ura' dressed like this. This is what's called the Christmas version of the beautiful hairstylist. Since the laundry shopkeeper was kind enough to prepare three outfits, I must do my best."

With Kuroe looking like a contestant in an elementary school's talent show (with even a mustache stuck on) yet calling herself the beautiful hairstylist, Haruaki could not help but think: what the heck is this? But he was already used to her ways and gave up on retorting snidely.

"Whatever. So, Fear, do you understand what's your job?"

"Hmph, don't look down on others. I just have to pull in customers and make them buy cakes, that's all. This is no different from what I did during the cultural festival. Too easy!"

"Easy huh... That still doesn't reassure me completely. Anyway, I'll be in charge of the cashier, so you should just focus on greeting customers. I'll need to enter the shop occasionally to replenish the cakes or help out in

the kitchen, so Konoha, please handle the cashier for me during those times."

"Please leave it to me. I think it's safest if Fear-san stays focused on greeting customers cordially."

"What~! Why are you treating me as though I'm some sort of decoration!? I'll curse you!"

"Right~ Let me teach you a trick, Ficchi. I think you should first memorize all the types of cakes being sold and their prices. On occasion, there should be customers who'll ask you 'which type tastes better' or something like that."

"Yeah. Nothing less expected of Kuroe, nice advice... Yeah, that's the stuff written on this flag, right?"

Fear picked up the flag from the long table and began to study it from top to bottom. After a while, she went "Okay, memorized." Nodding to herself, she proceeded to plant the flag into Konoha's chest in a most natural manner.

"Kyah—! What are you doing so suddenly!?"

"Muu, sorry. Because that valley's purpose is too unclear, I mistakenly thought it was a base for holding up a flag."

Really too worrying. As Haruaki sighed, Kuroe watched their interactions gleefully and waved lightly:

"Well then, it's about time I get back to the shop. Good luck~"

Hearing this, Fear and Konoha stopped glaring at each other.

"Oh, good luck to you too! Also... You need to be careful on your end, beware of that 'Santa Hunter'!"

"Fufu. By 'be careful,' you mean absolutely do not let him escape if I happen to run into him, right?"

"Of course! Since this concerns the shopping street's destiny, that criminal must be caught as soon as possible!"

"Understood~ Then I'm off~"

Kuroe waved again and headed back to her own shop. Only after she disappeared from view did Konoha finally open the cash register and begin to verify the coins used for giving change. On the other hand, Fear was murmuring meaninglessly as she adjusted the cakes' arrangement. "Is this better placed here? No, how about this side?" Surely, Fear was simply occupying herself in opposition to Konoha.

Haruaki sighed again, looking up towards the overcast sky overhead.

Indeed, the Christmas battle between shops could be considered connected to the shopping street's destiny perhaps. Judging from the magnificent decorations all over the place, even surpassing last year's, one could feel how serious everyone was. That said... (I understand that everyone's serious, but to think they would need to rely on these girls... The situation must be quite dire. The problem lies in the recession and—the Santa Hunter?)

The first time Haruaki heard this term was through the phone call Kuroe received the night before. The caller was the shopping street's cake shopkeeper who was asking if Kuroe could find part-timers to help sell Christmas cakes. The only reason why he had to ask her a mere two days before Christmas was because all the original part-timers suddenly decided not to come. This was due to rumors circulating on the streets that started a few days ago—The 'Santa Hunter' incident.

In other words, part-timers dressed in Santa costumes were being attacked and stripped of their clothing. To this date, the incident had occurred multiple times already. Since all the victims were attacked from behind, there were no clues at all and the police could only increase patrols at this stage. On the other hand, rumors began spreading among several schools, such as "the culprit must be a pervert" or "perhaps something worse might happen to the next victim." This led to difficulties in hiring enough part-timers, or the part-timers not showing up at the last moment—Caught in a bind due to these troubles, the cake shopkeeper had to turn to Kuroe for assistance. The main reason for seeking their help was due to Konoha having thrown a thief out of the bookstore where she worked part-time. This heroic exploit (in other words, a reputation as an amazing girl who could not be judged by appearance) had long since spread far and wide in the shopping street, but for some reason, Fear jumped at the opportunity and offered herself aggressively, saying "I'll do it too, please let me do it, I need to do beneficial things for people"—Thus resulting in the current situation.

(I already asked her many times, "this is your first time working part-time officially, is it really okay?" ...But it's true that the more helpers the better, and given how striking she looks, I'm sure she'll manage to attract quite a few customers.)

Haruaki turned his gaze away from the gray sky that seemed to reflect his internal thoughts. It was about time to get started with the work.

"No matter what... Since things have to this, there's no choice but to get with the program. Fear, you must treat Konoha as your role model. Please don't be rude to customers."

"M-Muu... But having to treat this Cow Tits as my role model really pisses me off..."

"Is this really the time to be saying that? Very well, please watch carefully."

Konoha took a deep breath and puffed out her chest of her revealing Santa outfit. This act alone was enough to bring in the attentions of pedestrians (mostly males) walking past along the street. Then she revealed her flawless business smile.

"Welcome~ Since it's Christmas, would you like to buy some delicious cake for the festive season?"

The effects were outstanding. Immediately, a man approached. "These will stay fresh until Christmas Eve, right? Which one should I pick..." Then he started to choose cakes. Haruaki elbowed Fear who was frowning as she stared at the scene.

"Okay, time for your debut. You should know already, the trick is to smile and promote with a loud voice."

"I-I know. You just watch..."

Fear took a deep breath and straightened herself beyond necessary. Then she moved the corner of her lips stiffly, presenting a rigid smile and said:

"W-Welcome. C-Christmas...! Tasty...!"

"So stiff!"

"...U-Uh cough. Not really. It's very usual. Th-This is the way, right?"

"What's usual about that? You clearly said it's no different from the cultural festival, too easy, but the end result is this?"

"S-Shut up, I'll curse you! Because last time, the customers entered the shop automatically on their own, but this time I need to pull customers in. That's... a bit different from what I expected."

"It's not like I can't understand... But there's that as well, remember you were passing out flyers when Kuroe just returned? Just remember the feeling. There's no need to be nervous."

"Muu... I-I know. I'll try."

Haruaki reminded himself not to keep focusing on Fear. Accepting the payment from the man just now who had finished choosing his cake, Haruaki operated the cash register. Perhaps Konoha's solicitation was working its effects, customers began to arrive in twos and threes to buy cake.

Fear seemed to be gradually getting used to pulling in customers but was still stiffly going "W-Wel... come... How about a cake... Yes?" However, since her appearance was quite attractive after all, it was not as though her contributions to the sales figure were zero.

"Uh~ Cake... very tasty... Hmm? Ohoh! Haruaki, a customer!"

"Hey Fear, you need to say 'Hello dear customer!'"

"Fufufu, don't worry about it. She's a foreigner, right? Her Japanese is really good."

Occasional exchanges of this sort appeared as a rather hectic period passed. However, the adorable Santa girls' serious appearances were attracting people apart from customers.

"Hey hey, say, you look great in that Santa outfit. Which school are you from? What time do you get off from work today?"

"Eh? Uh, excuse me, regarding such matters, I..."

A young man was hitting on Konoha. Completely failing to notice the twitching on her face, he was frequently glancing at her exposed shoulders and low neckline... Haruaki could not help but feel displeased. Even if he left them alone, Konoha would probably throw the guy out with a smile? But he should give a warning at least? Just as Haruaki pondered, a silver-haired Santa girl swaggered over and approached the man from behind.

"Hey."

"Oh, of course you can come as well. I'll call a friend over. After you get off from work, let's have tea the four of us together?"

"How suspicious. Are you... that one...?"

Oh no, why hasn't the man noticed Fear's dangerous gaze? Is it because he's one of those Japanese idiots born after the war and lacking in danger awareness?

"Whatever, you don't need to wait until I get off work. Follow me. Yes, that alley over there looks nice..."

"Uwah, you're so aggressive... I'm fine with it, but you don't need to drag me."

Fear used brute force to drag the sleeve of the man who was laughing stupidly. Her other hand was holding the Rubik's cube. Haruaki wanted to chase after them but as luck would have it, a group of housewives were currently choosing cakes, thus preventing Haruaki and Konoha from leaving their posts.

During this busy period, a pitiful wail sounding like a scream was heard from the alley. Fear pouted with dissatisfaction and stomped her way back.

"Muu... Unfortunately, I think I got the wrong person. Looks like the Santa Hunter won't be that easy to find."

"Getting the wrong person is acceptable in this case. Only right now can I say to you "Good job"... And there I was just now, looking for a plastic bucket nearby that this person could be stuffed into without problems."

Konoha nodded seriously in succession. Clearly her displeasure was on a greater level than when she threw the guy out last time. Truly terrifying.

(Hmm, sorry, Mr. Skirt Chaser. You've got nothing to blame but your rotten luck in a time like this...!)

After a long while, the cake shopkeeper and his wife came out of the shop. The shopkeeper with the small mustache said: "How's the situation?" After checking the revenue, he exchanged glances with his wife and smiled.

"Clearly the day after tomorrow should be the main event, but this is really quite a good pace... Asking Kuroe-chan for help really was the right

decision. Thank you all! You must be tired from standing all this time, right? Please leave things to us for now and take a break for half an hour. We've also prepared some cake for you so don't be shy and eat as much as you want."

Hence, Haruaki and his group decided to accept their kind offer and went inside for a break. After entering the cake shop's backyard, they found a table where a teapot and three portions of strawberry shortcake were prepared.

"Wow~ That looks really tasty."

"Nununu, this is—My very first time eating this cake! There's even a whole strawberry on top, that's truly extravagant! I was sure that this is food for royalty!"

"Eh, really? Even if it's this classic strawberry shortcake... I'm pretty sure Kuroe has bought cake to bring home quite a few times, right? You've never tried it before?"

"Never. On the other hand, I've tried the chocolate covered cake and that swirly one with the chestnut flavor."

"Really? Maybe because it's too classic, it got overlooked instead. Anyway, this is the most basic style of cake in Japan. Given instructions of 'Draw a picture of a cake!', everyone will surely draw this one."

"T-To think it runs that deep.... It must be very tasty!"

Gulp. Fear swallowed hard. Konoha had already poured out the tea that had been prepared for the three of them and was sitting on her chair to enjoy the brief break. After standing all this time, Haruaki's back and legs were burdened with fatigue. Popping the cake into his mouth, he felt the sweet sensation gradually seep throughout his exhausted body and mind.

So, what kind of reaction would she have? Haruaki turned his gaze to watch Fear chewing a large mouthful of cake with a serious expression. Then she suddenly stared wide-eyed.

"Th-This is... The cream is sweet and the bottom part is soft and spongy, how should I describe this... So delicious! Although it loses to rice crackers just by a little bit, muu, but this... is really great...!"

"That's really wonderful. You can tell the shopkeeper your impression afterwards, I'm sure he'll be very happy... You should try the strawberries

too. There are even people who insist that they're the true stars of the strawberry shortcake. Reportedly, in households with siblings, fights would even break out between family members."

"What!? Let me try the strawberries... Wow! Strawberries are already sweet to begin with, but with cream on top, that sweetness even goes a notch higher...! The one who invented this cake must be a genius, right?"

To the rest of them, this was strawberry shortcake that could be found anywhere, but in Fear's eyes, this was her first taste of food belonging to dreams. There probably existed many more things that could elicit the same reaction from her. Whenever Fear delivered them to her mouth, surely she would be greatly surprised with a myriad of facial expressions.

Haruaki smiled wryly as he sipped the hot tea while Konoha smiled helplessly as she ate her cake.



Just at this moment, Fear's eyes flashed brightly.

"If it's this tasty, I can understand. Fights breaking out in the family. In other words, if the powerless were to be robbed of their strawberries by the powerful, they can't complain..."

"Munch munch munch... Eh?"

"An opening! Gimme~!"

As Konoha watched in palpitation, Fear leapt like a wild beast, brandishing her fork. This happened just as Konoha was using her own fork to deliver a strawberry to her mouth. Naturally, an intense battle of forks ensued.

"S-Seriously... Such an utter lack of manners! Stop this immediately, Fear-san!"

"No way! Because strawberries are the stars of the strawberry shortcake! If you need to hate someone, hate Haruaki for telling me this fact!"

"I wasn't being serious, okay!?"

There was no opportunity to persuade them to stop. The intense struggle ended up causing the strawberry to slide off Konoha's fork. But since Fear's fork failed to intercept it in midair, the strawberry finally fell straight down.

Down into Konoha's cleavage.

"—It's there~!"

Nevertheless, the strawberry-attacking beast did not stop. Perhaps thinking that the act of swallowing that strawberry as quickly as possible would be proof of her victory, Fear abandoned her fork.

Then she buried her face there directly.

"Muu... Where, where is that cream-covered strawberry of yours!? Over here!? Over here!?"

"Hieh!? Hey, s-stop it... If you want it that much, I'll give it to you, ahhh... Stop it, just wait... Don't... lick that kind... of place..."

"Uh~ Cough, since I've finished my cake, it's about time for me to head out..."

Feeling like he was sitting on a pincushion, Haruaki left the backyard as though he were fleeing the scene.

Muttering "how troubling~" to himself, Haruaki went outside the shop and stretched his back. Overhead, the sky was still displaying a swathe of gray that seemed to embody the unease in his heart.

Indeed, he was still worrying about Fear in her part-time job. However, this was a kind of social education after all. Although there was some confusion more or less, which was understandable, Haruaki hoped that Fear could work hard and finish things to the very end peacefully without issue... It would be best if a chaotic scene, like the strawberry battle just now, did not occur again.

There were still several hours until the end of work today.

If it doesn't rain, that'd be best—Haruaki thought.

Part 2

She was very confused. Nothing could be understood.

Was she really that weak? Why did her body not listen to to her?

While jumping from one building to another, she simultaneously swung her blade at the closely approaching figure. She kept repeating this action. Each and every time, a solid metallic impact was heard.

Drip. The sound of metal was interspersed with that of water droplets falling from the sky. Even so, she could not afford to halt her movements now. The instant she stopped, she would be captured. That was all she knew.

The instant she was about to jump towards the next building, she was attacked. Just barely managing to dodge it, she was pushed off balance, however. The falling sensation aroused instincts like a caged beast's, causing her to counterattack automatically but she was unable to touch the enemy's body, that of the hunter. A certain twisted noise was heard after the opponent's weapon was withdrawn from the clash. The enemy made a tongue-clicking sound and prepared to kick her just as she was about to fall, approaching before her eyes—

I might have died already—She thought. In the next instant, she felt the impact. Being able to feel the impact implied that she was still alive. Probably. Really?

Her head felt heavy. Her body felt heavy. Her view was dim. Perhaps due to the increasingly heavy rain. Or maybe caused by some other reason. No idea.

She slowly pushed her fallen body up. Within her hazy view, a small cube was rolling. Subconsciously, she reached out and grabbed it. What was it?

She felt some shaking. With some difficulty, she realized she was on top of the cargo space of a truck that was waiting for the traffic signal to change. Beneath her was a vinyl sheet covering some sort of soft material. She also realized that the shaking just now came from the enemy who had landed on the same truck in pursuit.

Seeing the object in her hand, the enemy grinned and spoke.

This cube is capable of "letting someone—"

In other words, it was the cube for realizing mankind's greatest wish.

Wish. Wish. Wish. What was her own wish? She wondered.

Defeating this enemy? No.

Her wish—what she needed to do—There was only one thing.

Hence, she went into action. To escape.

She attacked the enemy who stood on this cargo space of the same truck—After making this feint, she jumped sideways.

A floating sensation. Next, she found her body surrounded by flowing water that was even colder than the rain.

The hunter heard the noise of water.

The sound did not come from the cold, nonstop rain but from the river beside the road. Due to the inky blackness of the night, she had not noticed the river's existence until this point. Although she hastily jumped off the truck as well, no signs of her prey remained in the river, probably washed away by the current or fled into a sewer.

She scratched her head gruffly, clicking her tongue again at the same time.

"Tsk... Was that her full power already? If that's the case, I am so very disappointed. What should I do...?"

Kokoro Pentangeli murmured impatiently.

Part 3

A drizzle started around dusk. By the time it was time to get off work, the rain had already developed into a total downpour.

"Uwah, this is really cold... Had I known, I would've brought the retractable umbrella as well. Here, hold this."

Pulling his coat collar up, Haruaki handed the umbrella from his school bag to Fear. Unlike Fear who was essentially empty-handed, Konoha had definitely brought her own umbrella. However, back when they were changing before heading home, Konoha was murmuring inexplicably with a stunned expression: "Oh no! If only I had forgotten to bring one... Then the two of us... could share one umbrella...!"

The trio took shelter under the cake shop's eaves and waited for a while. Having told them "given this rare chance, let's go home together" earlier, Kuroe appeared with splashing footsteps.

"Thanks for waiting~"

"Yeah, you've been working hard too... Oh, where's your Santa suit?"

"I left it in the 'Dan-no-ura' because I'll be borrowing it until Christmas Eve. Speaking of which, today is really cold."

"I know right!? Did you realize it too? That Santa outfit... Despite the furry trimmings, it's quite weak in guarding against the cold! The real Santa definitely has a tough time. Someone really gotta help me think of a solution. If he catches a cold and becomes unable to deliver presents, I absolutely can't accept that!"

Kuroe giggled. With this as the signal, they started on the journey home. The streets at night were quite deserted. The raindrops were icy cold and their backs trembled from the winter air of the night. Even the water currents of the gray river, which was visible from the side of the road, seemed even more turbulent and rapid than usual. But even faced with

such a scene on their way home, the group definitely felt more than cold and loneliness while they walked.

So many different things happened today, although it was hard work, I finished my job perfectly—Fear announced proudly as though she were recounting heroic exploits. In response, Kuroe concurred happily despite her usual sleepy-looking demeanor. On the other hand, Konoha made corrections in exasperation, causing Fear to pout and object. It was an inexplicably comforting scene and could not be more ordinary.

"Then... Muo, it's really cold...! That thing you have there looks quite warm."

"Oh drats. To think I'd be the only one with an item providing protection against the cold, that would be a taint to my honor as Ficchi's lover. Come over here, Ficchi... Like this, here. Swirl swirl."

Kuroe untied her long scarf and wrapped quite a few revolutions around Fear's neck. Then she wrapped the remaining portion around her own neck again. The shared scarf look commonly used by couples.

"Wow, so warm! The scarf is such a great invention... Hmph hmph, are you jealous? Haruaki and Cow Tits!?"

Connected to Kuroe via the scarf, Fear suddenly turned her head. Dragged with a "Wah~", Kuroe was also forced to turn her head as well. Haruaki really wished they could be more careful and not strangle themselves.

"Yes yes yes, it does look quite warm, how wonderful. I should wear a scarf tomorrow... Haruaki-kun, why don't you wear a scarf as well? Well, umm... If what Kuroe-san is currently doing can be repeated, of course I have no reason to object, instead I'd welcome it, we must try it out..."

The latter half of Konoha's speech turned into awkward murmurings that Haruaki could not quite catch, but he did agree wholeheartedly that getting a scarf would be nice.

"Actually I was thinking of wearing one today, but who knows if I dropped it somewhere last year or it was put away some place strange, I haven't been able to find it."

"Oh dear, is that so... How terrible~ So a scarf was a right choice huh..."

"Hmm, what did you say?"

"N-Nothing, nothing at all!"

Konoha shook her head frantically. For some reason, Fear was also staring over in Haruaki's direction, but then she turned away in a panic as soon as they made eye contact.

Just at this moment—

Having turned her gaze elsewhere, Fear suddenly stopped walking. "Choke~" Completely unaware that Kuroe's neck was being strangled again, she simply stared at one direction—The night sky with its flying raindrops.

"What's the matter, Fear?"

"Just now... I-I saw it, I saw it! Really for sure~"

"You saw what?"

Fear waved her umbrella forcefully and raised her voice with an even more excited expression:

"Santa Claus! I saw something red fly past just now! Over there! On top of the building!"

Haruaki and Konoha exchanged exasperated looks. Only Kuroe took the opportunity to pour fuel onto the fire as usual:

"Wow~ Something red flying across the sky, that's definitely Santa Claus~ However, I'm a bit bothered by the fact that he's two days early... Oh right, time difference, it's probably because of the time difference. Ficchi!"

"The time difference!? I get it now!"

Don't agree and don't let her agree! As much as Haruaki wanted to call out the nonsense, things did not go as wished. That was because Fear ignored getting wet and sprinted off to a mad dash. "He went that way!" Linked to her, Kuroe had no choice but to be dragged along. That said, Haruaki was pretty sure that Kuroe would follow along on her own even if they were not tied together.

Left without a choice, Haruaki and Konoha followed. Should they tell her the truth now that Santa Claus did not actually exist? Or should they let Fear's enthusiasm continue? Or should they prepare some other explanation? Haruaki agonized over his dilemma.

Fear stopped in front of an inconspicuous space located behind a mixed-tenant building. Having lost Santa Claus' trail, she murmured softly: "Is there anywhere nearby to hide...? Right here—!?"

Next, she rushed somewhere and discovered a dead end alley that was completely desolate and not used for anything.

What an amazing miracle, Haruaki thought to himself. This place was quite impossible to find. If Fear had not recognized something as Santa Claus, if she had not chased after the target, if she had not happened to run to this place, indeed, the search would not have bore fruit.

But their search did bear fruit.

Rather than a crashed Santa Claus—

For Haruaki's group, this was a very familiar person whom they could not forget.

Over there was a dark-skinned person. The girl named Un Izoey was lying there with her eyes shut.

The red liquid flowing out from her body was silently mixing with the cold rain.

Part 4

"Ahhh, jeez, there's blood all over... Ugh. Anyway, I've repeated myself so many times already but I still need to say this! Haruaki-kun, you're a nice guy to a fault!"

"Umm... Hmm, eh, of course I know that this girl is that annoying guy's companion. Even I find this quite strange... But for now, let's first..."

"Hmph, it's all because of those guys—the Lab Chief's Nation—that I suffered so much pain. But no matter what, it never occurred to me to deliver a killing blow to someone in this state."

Carrying Un Izoey in his arms, Haruaki hurried home with his friends while avoiding people's sight. Although he considered calling for an ambulance, this dark-skinned girl might not necessarily have a passport. As much as possible, he wanted to avoid getting involved with the authorities.

"First of all, we need towels and bandages, right? I've brought them."

"Oh, nice work, Fear. So, Kuroe, how is she...?"

"Hmm~ The bleeding is quite severe but the wound itself doesn't seem too deep... Anyway, I'll wrap it up with my hair first. This will instantly cure it."

"Really, that's great... Can I say that? But, in that case, why is she still unconscious?"

"...She has a fever. Wearing so little and completely drenched, catching a cold is normal. Anyway, I'll wipe her body first and get her changed... Cough, Haruaki-kun?"

Spearheaded by Konoha who had her palm pressed against Un Izoey's forehead, the female faction's gazes all shot towards Haruaki at the same time. After a bit of thought, Haruaki finally understood the reason.

"Oh, r-right, I'll go wait outside!"

Haruaki hastily rushed out of the guest room, closing the sliding door behind him as he exhaled.

At least her life was not in danger but the situation was still full of mysteries. Why was she in that kind of place? Why was she hurt? Didn't they promise not to approach Fear again?

"Fear-san, could you grab one end of the white coat? I'm going to take it off... Go."

"Nuu! Although she's originally an enemy already, this makes her even more of an enemy now! An member of the faction opposing the Ladylike Bosoms Alliance! Damn you, wobbling nonstop over there as though showing off... Is there anyway to deflate them?"

"Hey, stop poking the sleeping patient! What are you thinking about? If you've got the leisure to do that, hurry up and help wipe her body with the towel!"

"Damn Cow Tits, nothing less expected from the leader of the opposing faction. To go so far as asking me to wipe this body, you must be planning to dishearten me and gloat secretly... Hmph, I'll curse you. And inject a curse directly into here as well. Deflate~ Shrink~"

"Mode: «Satisfied Yorimori». Then let me help change her lower garments. Ohoh, what's this? Underwear that smells of a thong... Doesn't this bring up certain memories, Kono-san?"

"...I recall nothing. Indeed, nothing at all."

"Is that memory completely insignificant to you, Kono-san? I'm so heartbroken~ ...Glare~"

"Hey Kuroe-san, please stop taking advantage of the chaos to peek!"

The voices coming from the room were making Haruaki's face red. Precisely because there were no images, his imagination was running especially wild, what a quandary. During this time, he heard someone thumping a futon.

"Uh... Anyway, let her lie down first. Haruaki-kun."

"O-Okay. Then I'm coming in."

Haruaki cleared his mind and entered the guest room once more. Just as Konoha instructed, Un Izoey was currently lying in the guest futon that was originally kept in the cupboard.

"Huff... Mmm... Huff... Ah..."

Un Izoey's cheeks were reddened cheeks and her breathing was slightly quickened. From the opening in the futon, her shoulders could be seen shaking slightly. She seemed to be in great pain but there was no obvious solution to alleviate her discomfort.

Sloppily placed beside the futon were her original clothes but apart from that, the rest of her possessions were currently kept on Konoha's lap. Perhaps noticing Haruaki's gaze, Konoha explained to him:

"Even with her in this state, we can't let her have access to the knife and elastic bow. I will be keeping these."

"Yeah, that's true... It can't be helped."

"Her possessions also include this letter, as well as... This strange cube."

"What is it?"

"Who knows. At this point, all I can do is call it a cube."

It was roughly palm-sized and made of metal with rust spots all over. Only one face of the cube was hollowed out with an opening. If anything, one could describe it as a cube-shaped measuring cup. "Lemme have a look, Cow Tits." Fear took the strange cube and inclined her head:

"Muu... No idea. But somehow, it seems to bring out a sense of closeness in the depths of my heart, but not exactly."

"Even if she's carrying it because tribal rules dictate that 'This must be used for drinking water,' I wouldn't be surprised. Anyway, why don't you hold onto it as a fellow cube... I'll go prepare pajamas and other clothing. We can't have her lying naked there indefinitely."

"Right. We also need to give her medicine. Let me look for some."

"Then I'll take care of her together with Kuroe... Or is it surveillance...? After all, better safe than sorry."

"A very correct attitude. Then we'll be off."

Parting with Konoha to perform their tasks independently, Haruaki headed to the living room and searched the shelves where medical supplies were kept while he pondered.

Indeed, better safe than sorry, probably. Recalling the incident instigated by the Lab Chief's Nation—Yamimagari Pakuaki—singlehandedly at the cultural festival, Haruaki could not help but think that. Since that organization was involved, perhaps things were secretly going on without their knowledge.

Hence—It was probably best to inform her, thought Haruaki spontaneously and took out his cellphone from his pocket.

"Ah, hello? Sorry to disturb you this late. Because things have gotten a bit troublesome, I thought I should give you a report at least. Uh, actually..."

Haruaki recounted briefly what had happened. He ended up getting a very brief response from her as well. She simply answered in an urgent tone of voice:

"Wait ten minutes for me! We'll talk then. I'm hanging up now!"

"Eh? No, I just wanted to ask... Umm... Hello?"

Then just as she promised, ten minutes later—Haruaki was at the entrance, welcoming her arrival to the Yachi residence.

Goodness knows how hard she ran. She was completely out of breath.

Dropping a large bag from her shoulder by her feet, she said:

"Those people, that... Who knows what kind of conspiracy is afoot, also... Possibly... Attracting your attention with Un Izoey then doing something to me... So, since you're letting her stay in this house and taking care of her, well then, for the sake of personal safety, I think this is the only thing I can do. Yes, of course I am aware that I came too suddenly and it's a little inappropriate. But in spite of that, if you could accept a shameless request I am proposing—"

Ueno Kirika said something that made the situation even more chaotic:

"—Please allow me to stay over tonight. What do you think, Yachi?"

Completely contrary to the meaning of the word "request"...

Seeing her bag that seemed to be packed to the brim with belongings for a stayover—No matter how he thought about it, Haruaki was certain he had no power to refuse.

Part 5

Inside the guest room where Un Izoey was sleeping soundly, Fear crossed her arms and pondered.

"I see, so this girl is staying here as a red herring while they take advantage of the opening to make a move on Kirika huh... That sounds very plausible. But the problem is that this really doesn't look like acting."

"No acting required as long as Un Izoey herself remains in the dark. All that's needed is the final outcome evolves to this... If it's that man, he could very well do this."

Sitting formally in seiza, Kirika spoke with a serious demeanor. That's true too—Fear's dainty face frowned and she nodded.

"In other words, he won't shy away from deceiving comrades when formulating plans huh... An astute observation as expected of Kirika. Very well, in that case, I welcome you of course! That said, I'd still welcome you very much in any other situation!"

"Yes yes, if it's Kiririn, feel free to stay at our home~ Or rather, I was actually quite shocked to learn that this is your first time staying overnight."

Kirika forced a smile in response to the unbelievable nickname. At this moment, Konoha drew near Haruaki's ear and whispered:

"Uh... Are you really going to allow Ueno-san to spend the night here?"

"Aren't Class Rep's worries reasonable? After all, she's undoubtedly the one who knows best about the other side's ways of doing things... Hmm, Konoha, you wouldn't happen to have any objections, would you?"

Konoha hesitated and began to twiddle with her braids with a complicated expression on her face while sighing. "Ooh, has the formidable rival finally gone on the offensive...? No, perhaps there's no deeper meaning to this, it's possible that her actions are prompted by the current situation without ulterior motives... Hmm, it's better for psychological health if I don't overthink things, right? Then it's decided. I'll try my best..." After murmuring that, she proceeded to say: "Cough cough, of course there's no problem. On further thought, having girls stay overnight in this home has already become commonplace. Even if I object, it's useless. Earlier, even Kaidou-sensei and that girl from the enemy side spent a night here at our home. I just need to keep my eyes wide open and pay very close attention to prevent indecent incidents from happening."

"I have to state just for the record. I've never done any of that intentionally..."

At this moment, Kirika turned towards Konoha with a serious expression and kept her head bowed apologetically.

"I've caused trouble for Konoha-kun as well. It also goes without saying, I cannot forgive this boy here if he does anything indecent or absolutely ridiculous. Thank you for your hospitality."

"Very well, leave this responsibility to me. Since school is over and the holidays have started, I think it's fine even if I punish him a little more severely... So I shall teach him a lesson without any mercy at all!"

Konoha's forceful declaration made Haruaki even more ill at ease. He really hoped she would not do that.

"By the way... Why did this person faint in that kind of place?"

"Hmm. That man already said he won't make a move on me again... Is he going back on his word? Or is it unrelated to me? I have no idea at all."

"Currently, it looks like she's simply unconscious due to catching a cold? In that case, we'll just have to question her when she wakes up. Since she's actually moved here already, we can't help it. But to be honest, I really have no wish to get involved with that organization again. Although I can get in touch with them, reluctant as I am to do so, I don't want to do it at all unless there's a special reason."

"Of course. Forcing you to do anything unwilling never crossed my mind at all. She's already taken her medicine and Kuroe has treated her wounds, so she should be recovering soon. But I remember how despite being human, this girl's martial arts were exceptionally powerful. Who on earth could have injured her?"

"The only possibility coming into mind is that it's related to our kind? By borrowing the powers of a cursed tool, the opponent won effortlessly—although I doubt if the incident is actually that simple. Regardless, let's not lower our guard just because we've confiscated her weapons. If she goes on a rampage the moment she wakes up, it will be a pain."

Konoha made very valid points. Anyway, they decided to keep a close watch over her for the night with someone staying in the room at all times to care for and monitor her.

As the night grew late, conversation dwindled and a sense of drowsiness naturally invaded. Just as Haruaki shook his head to dispel the urge to sleep—

"Oh Haruaki-kun, you guys should get some rest. Ueno-san, please use the other guest room to sleep."

"No, don't mind me. I'd feel guilty if I were the only one sleeping while the rest of you stayed on watch."

"That's right, Konoha-kun, you don't need to mind me either."

"Please, I'm the one hoping that you two won't mind. Or rather... Yes, it's true that someone is needed here to monitor her, but having five of us all staring at her is too much of a waste of time. We need a division of labor that leverages our respective strengths. Our kind can easily go without sleep for a day or two, but what about humans?"

"Only in this instant does Cow Tits speak true words. Yes, we should take turns to rest and nap suitably."

Granted... Haruaki and Kirika looked at each other. With everyone else clearly awake, the idea of just the two of them going off to sleep really weighed on their consciences.

"Oh, how about this? I'll bring blankets over and sleep here directly. The two of us will take shifts as well."

"Yes. Although it's a matter of feeling, if you girls could let us take shifts, we would be very grateful."

After Haruaki made the suggestion, Kirika supported his idea. Konoha shrugged lightly.

"I can't convince you, can I... Then let's do that. However, you two must rest first for now."

Obeying respectfully, Haruaki and Kirika left the guest room together. Let me take a bath before going to bed—Just as Haruaki was carrying fresh clothing to the changing area, he happened to run into Kirika who was brushing her teeth.

"...Oh, Y-Yachi, you're going to take a bath? Sorry, I'll be done right away."

"N-No, you don't need to rush—By the way, you don't need to take a bath, Class Rep?"

"That's right, I took one at home before coming. Or more accurately, you called me right when I had just finished my shower."

"I-I see..."

What a refreshing look. Kirika had let down her hair. Was this how she looked whenever she went to bed? Purely regarding the detail of her hair, Haruaki had seen it many times before already, but currently, she was also wearing adorable pajamas. Now that was a look he had never seen before.

"W-What are you doing, staring at me with so much interest, how absolutely ridiculous...!"

Brush brush brush! Kirika swiftly finished brushing her teeth with reckless abandon and prepared to leave the washroom, blushing mildly. That reminded Haruaki, staring at a girl in her pajamas was quite impolite. Warning himself, Haruaki watched Kirika leave and said:

"Goodnight, Class Rep."

Kirika paused in her steps for a mere moment. Then she turned her face slightly over and said:

"Y-Yeah... Goodnight."

Then she left the changing area in earnest. This really was quite a new experience. Exchanging goodnights with Kirika. Sleeping under the same roof. Welcoming the same morning in one room. Somehow, Haruaki felt his heart racing a little.

"No no no, it's not like she's on my mind... Though it really does feel quite new. I'd better finish my bath quickly and get back."

Muttering to himself as he scratched his head, Haruaki swiftly undressed.

Sitting in the guest room, wrapped in a blanket, Haruaki closed his eyes. Quite some time passed. Suddenly, Haruaki woke up from shallow sleep. Half awake, he opened his eyes slightly, only to find a round, silver mass leaping into view inside the room. He also heard faint breathing noises—

"...It's true that we're good at enduring sleep deprivation, but that doesn't mean we don't feel the desire to sleep... However, given some determination, we're not supposed to fall asleep like her in the middle of things. I must be looking at an exception while I speak."

"Can't be helped, Ficchi was tired from working as a part-timer today. Are you okay, Kono-san?"

"A little sleepy, but I'm fine."

"If you feel like sleeping, why don't you take a quick shower? I'll handle the surveillance here. Don't worry."

"Hmm~ ...I guess I'll take you up on that offer. I'll be right back as soon as possible."

Sliding the door open, Konoha left the room. Next, there was complete silence for a while until Kuroe heard the sliding sound of blankets that did not come from herself.

"Hmm..."

"Oh my, did we wake you up? It's only been an hour. You can continue sleeping."

"Hmm, mmm... Really, then... No, before that, let me go to the toilet... Yawn..."

"Sure, go ahead. You're not walking very steadily. Will you be okay?"

"No prob... lem..."

Immediately after Kirika's sleepy response, the room's sliding door could be heard opening and shutting again. Since only an hour had passed, Haruaki decided it was okay for him to continue sleeping as well. Still half asleep when he made that decision, Haruaki covered himself with the soft blanket again.

(Come to think of it, Class Rep's voice sounded so sleepy... I guess even for Class Rep, she still gives off that impression when waking up. It feels so... refreshing... Zzz...)

He slipped into the dream world again. But this did not persist for long.

Suddenly, a loud blanket tugging noise was heard, causing Haruaki to wake to a start.

The instant he opened his eyes, all sense of sleep vanished without trace.

Because Kirika's face was right before his eyes.

"Mmm... Zzz..."

(W-Why...?)

Kirika had burrowed beneath the same blanket as him. Inside the dim room, his eyes, already accustomed to the darkness, were burning the image of Kirika's extremely near face deeply into his retinas. They were so close together that their noses were almost about to touch. Her regular breathing was tickling his skin. His fingertips could also feel the sensation of her long, sleek, soft hair. A girl's fragrance was trapped inside the blanket with nowhere to go except Haruaki's nasal cavity. As his eyes became even more used to the dark, Haruaki next saw her collarbone, glistening with sweat, just barely in view under the collar of her pajamas.

"Mmm... Hmm..."

While giving off inexplicably seductive moans, Kirika used her fingers to undo the top button of her pajamas. Probably an unconscious act due to feeling hot. On that exposed chest was a certain imposing presence, clad

in black leather. Haruaki shifted his gaze away from the valley but found his eyes drawn to her lips this time. Looking very soft, a girl's lips. Excessively close lips. As she tossed and turned slightly, her knee struck Haruaki through her pajamas. Haruaki's entire body and mind could feel her right in front of him. Crap, no matter what, this was a crisis...!

"Phew, I'm back~"

"Wah!"

The one who screamed out was not Haruaki.

"Kuroe-san? Why are you approaching Haruaki-kun's blanket with a camera in your hand?"

"Uh~ Well... I invoke my right to remain silent."

"—I won't repeat myself again, Kuroe-san."

Her voice was cold to the extreme. Perhaps feeling her life was endangered, Kuroe swiftly gave up her right to remain silent.



"Because Kiririn entered the wrong blanket in her sleepy state, I was thinking what a rare opportunity and wanted to hurry and take a photo to commemorate. I'm really sorry. I originally intended to wake her up immediately to let her know. Serious."

"Wha—! Speaking of which, that bulge under the blanket is actually...!"

Flip! The blanket was lifted. Oh no. Haruaki frantically closed his eyes but it was too late. This action ended up activating a certain switch inside Konoha instead.

Very gently, so gently that it made one's hair stand on end, laughter entered his ears.

"Ufufufu... I saw you close your eyes, Haruaki-kun... Are you pretending to be asleep? In other words, you clearly discovered the situation but deliberately chose not to leave the blanket right away? That way, you could stay in the same blanket, leaning close together, secretly smelling her scent and enjoying yourself to your heart's content, is that it...?"

"N-No, I also just... just found out, so my mind is in chaos."

By this point, covering up was useless. Hence, Haruaki opened his eyes in trepidation and tried to explain himself, but Konoha simply cut him off without explanation.

"Do you still remember, Haruaki-kun? What I said earlier."

"W-What did you say...?"

Konoha smiled cordially.

Faced with that perfectly gentle smile, why did he feel so horrified that his consciousness was beginning to drift afar?

"—Today's punishment can be a little more severe, isn't that right?"

Part 6

The next morning, Haruaki woke up in the guest room.

"Ah! ...What's going on? Somehow I feel like I had an extremely horrifying dream... No, it's probably an illusion, r-right...?"

Having just awakened, he was unable to judge his memories. While wiping sweat off his brow, Haruaki surveyed the room in his hazy state. Everyone staying at the Yachi residence were all gathered inside this guest room.

Fear was still snoring away, curled into a ball. Kuroe was rubbing her head while muttering "ooh, Kono-san's knuckle grinding against my temples is giving me a splitting headache... As expected, I couldn't come out of this unscathed?" Kirika was only just getting up as well. "I was only planning on a nap, but ended up sleeping all the way till morning huh... Clearly I wouldn't have minded if they woke me. But how odd, this position doesn't seem quite the same as where I went to bed last night...?" Watching with her half-opened eyes, she inclined her head in puzzlement. As for Konoha—

"Good morning, Haruaki-kun."

She was sitting formally in seiza posture while smiling. Clearly it was just an ordinary smile but somehow, Haruaki found himself breaking out in cold sweat.

"G-Good morning..."

"What's the matter? Why does your face look like you had a nightmare? Judging from your dream, undoubtedly it must have been one that taught you an important lesson? Since you are a good boy, Haruaki-kun, surely you'll remember your lesson well from now on~"

Fufufu—Konoha nodded. Haruaki hastily nodded.

Just at this moment—

The smile faded from Konoha's face. She still won't forgive me? I knew it, I guess I'll have to prostrate myself and apologize again? But Haruaki's panic only lasted an instant. Following Konoha's gaze, he immediately realized he was not responsible for her faded smile.

Indeed, inside this room—There was another person.

"My doubt: unable to understand the current situation. However—"

The gray-haired girl lifted her upper torso and gazed at Haruaki's group. Her unkempt hair had grown much longer since the last time they saw her. Her dark-skinned collarbone was visible from the collar of her pajamas. Her eyes were completely devoid of emotion.

"Even so, I think I should still greet everybody with the greeting meant for waking up. In other words, good morning."

Speaking in a flat tone of voice, she greeted with a bow of her head while sitting up in the futon.

Chapter 2 - The Unknown Making a Wish to Him / "Jingle Bell Rock"

Part 1

"The rice is done. Should I carry the entire rice cooker over?"

"Yeah, Class Rep, thanks."

It was December 23 today. Due to being a holiday, unlike usual mornings, there was no need to watch the clock when making breakfast to make sure they got to school on time. With Kirika's help, the breakfast Haruaki made included two more portions than usual. Kirika, as well as the girl who just woke up.

"In any case, thank goodness she finally woke up... Now we can finally ask her questions."

"Yeah, but don't get careless. Her words cannot be taken as unconditional truth."

They whispered discreetly to each other while bringing trays into the living room, but only found Kuroe and Fear with no signs of Konoha and Un Izoey in the room.

"The two of them went to the toilet~"

"Right, that girl seems to be super country bumpkin. Does she even know how to use a flush toilet...? Hmph, if she has no idea, then it proves that she's on an even lower level than my past self, seeing as I was able to use the toilet correctly even back when I first arrived!"

"Well, it's not like she just left Africa two days ago..."

Just as Haruaki groaned, voices could be heard from the direction of the washroom in question—

"H-Hold it right there! Pause! Pause!"

"My question: is there a problem here?"

"Of course there is... Hey, stand still right now~!"

The footsteps reached the living room. Haruaki's rice bowl almost fell from his hand.

This was due to Un Izoey's drastic change in appearance. Since her pajama top only had the second button fastened, not only was her navel exposed, but a certain bulging area was also in quite a dangerous state. No, if one had to talk about dangerous, before mentioning her top, her lower half had already completely transcended the bounds of dangerous.

She was wearing nothing except underwear down there.

"...!"

Zoom! Konoha rushed into the living room mere seconds later, carrying what must be the pajama pants that Un Izoey had removed, using it to cover her up, trying desperately to conceal those dark-skinned thighs.

"What... on earth... are you trying to do...!?"

"My conclusion: a difference in cultural understanding. The navel should not be concealed. My explanation: wearing pants feels too restrictive, agitating."

Why was this person here so angry? Un Izoey's face seemed to be saying that in confusion with her head tilted. Konoha shuddered her entire body violently and said: "Ahhh, seriously, just when I thought one indecent element had passed, yet a new indecent element arrives...!"

In any case, Un Izoey was asked to wrap a sheet around her waist as a compromise. Although the overall effect was quite reminiscent of tribal attire, because she sat with her knee up, it was still quite dangerous in various ways. This sitting posture was not exactly polite, but that could be chalked up to differences in cultural understanding as well.

Hence, breakfast began. Since Un Izoey did not seem to know how to use chopsticks, Haruaki had prepared a fork and a spoon for her, but even then, she used them with great stiffness and unfamiliarity.

Fear and the girls would glare at Un Izoey on occasion while eating their meal in silence. Out of everyone, Kirika's gaze was the most wary. On the other hand, Kuroe's eyes, sleepy-looking as always, were the least intense.

So quiet that one could hear a pin drop, breakfast finished amidst the tense atmosphere.

"So... I'm full. Are you full yet?"

Fear glared sharply at Un Izoey.

"My confirmation: the act of eating is finished. Conclusion obtained: very tasty."

"That's the shameless brat's only good point. So, you wouldn't happen to think you can get away with a free meal, right? Since you're full now, let's cut to the chase... We have many questions for you."

"My answer: I will answer everything I can answer."

"Hmph. First of all: why did you faint in that kind of place? What happened?"

Un Izoey answered briefly without hesitation at all:

"I was attacked by the Draconians."

"What did you say...?"

Everyone gasped. They had first come into contact with the Draconians roughly half a month earlier, the organization seeking to become the "strongest." Naturally, they were reminded of a certain encountered girl.

"What did the enemy look like...? Right, was there a petite girl similar to these two in size together with a partner who had a veil on her face?"

"...? No, answer: negative. Enemy is a single swordfighter."

"A different person? That does make sense since all the weapons in that child's possession were destroyed and both her hands should have been fractured by Kaidou-sensei's attack after all. In any case, you were attacked by someone from the Draconians. As for the reason—Hmm, I think I can hazard a rough guess."

"My answer: to be correct, unknown. Simply attacked is the explanation."

"Hmph, because of your weird and unique fighting style using your legs, plus you look so conspicuous, if those Draconians learned of your existence... It's quite likely they would send someone to attack as a way to test themselves. Hah, serves you right. I hope you'll taste the same pain that I suffered."

"Defeating strong opponents to obtain corresponding experience—A notion similar to that. It almost sounds like living in an RPG world. A swordfighter character further adds to that feeling~"

"But after attacking you, it's possible that those Draconians might want to defeat me to gain experience. That can't be ruled out. So, tell us more about that swordfighter's characteristics."

Un Izoey nodded obediently.

"My answer: a girl all dressed in red clothing."

"Red clothing... Is that it? Hah, that girl sure sounds like Santa. So that's what I misrecognized."

"Santa?"

Seeing Un Izoey cocking her head in puzzlement, Fear declared proudly:

"Hmph hmph, you didn't know? Let me tell you then... Santa Claus is the mysterious elderly volunteer who goes around everywhere giving presents to all good children! I heard that he dressed in red and drives a sleigh pulled by servants like reindeer to fly in the sky!"

"Driving a sleigh to fly in the sky. I am surprised by this great surprise. What kind of skill is that?"

"Muu. I don't know the details of how it works, after all, he's the mysterious elderly volunteer. What could it be... C-Could it be an anti-gravity drive system developed by NASA? —That's what Kuroe over there suggested. Also, Santa Claus only appears once a year during Christmas. I think it's because Christmas is supposed to be a special day that allows wishes to be fulfilled... right..."

Getting even more carried away in her sense of superiority, Fear began to explain about Santa Claus and Christmas. Of course, there were quite a few inaccuracies, but Haruaki decided to simply observe them from the side with a warm and fuzzy feeling in his heart. Were he to rain on her parade, there was a possibility that Fear might find out the truth about Santa Claus.

After Fear's explanations were done, Un Izoey, who had been listening with great interest, nodded.

"I see. Truly, an unknown has become known."

"Show me your gratitude properly, country girl. However... I'm quite bothered by the idea that the enemy is a girl resembling Santa. Although

she would be on the side of the hunted rather than the hunter, does this have anything to do with the 'Santa Hunter'...?"

"My question: 'Santa Hunter' is another unknown term."

"Recently, there has been a recurring incident where people in Santa suits were attacked and had their clothes stolen. Is it you, perhaps? If you're related in any way, confessing straight away here would be a wise decision!"

"No. I explain that myself who arrived in this city only yesterday is an impossible impossibility."

However, Un Izoey looked up as though she were recalling something:

"Except—the Draconian had a sack on her back. When she attacked, I saw cloth inside that looked like red clothes."

"Wait a sec. Putting aside the fact that she was wearing red clothing and looked like Santa—You said her sack contained red clothes? In that case, in other words—"

"The clothes might have been stolen from other people. In that case, this means that the Draconian is the 'Santa Hunter'! It can't be a coincidence no matter how I think about it... I've no idea why she needs to attack Santa-costumed people and take their clothes, but at least we've caught her red-handed!"

Fear shouted with excitement. In contrast, Un Izoey spoke in complete seriousness:

"My supplement: I explain that the enemy's hands were not red."

Silence and speechlessness pervaded the entire living room. Oh dear, where should one start in educating the ignorant? Just as Haruaki's group froze under this atmosphere, someone spoke as though trying to make use of this period of silence:

"Then what happened?"

Kirika glared at the dark-skinned girl and said with a tone of voice colder than anyone else's:

"Fear-kun has found a lead for the 'Santa Hunter' she has been looking for all this time, congratulations. But before that, there is something else that

must be asked. Please continue to answer my next questions. Why did you come to this town? Your job should be something like Yamimagari Pakuaki's bodyguard, right? Where is that man? Has he arrived in town as well? What is your goal? Haven't we agreed already that your side will stop making moves on me and Fear-kun? Are you guys trying to go back on that? What exactly is going on? Answer me right now!"

In contrast to Kirika's emotional tone of voice, Un Izoey quietly narrowed her eyes and answered:

"No, answer: negative. The deal is effective. My visit is unrelated. The Lab Chief did not come. In this city, only I am here."

"...Who knows. Then why did he get rid of his bodyguard and you're the only one here? For what reason?"

"Order."

A simple answer. This meant that she came to cause them trouble again? Perhaps noticing the dangerous gazes from Fear and the others, Un Izoey shook her head, her gray hair swaying from side to side.

"This order has no direct relation to you. But it cannot be said to be completely unrelated."

"What do you mean? Related or unrelated? Please explain clearly."

"That's right. By this point, please stop saying anything ambiguous. What is your purpose?"

Phew~ Un Izoey exhaled, still expressionless.

"Contents of the order: deliver this letter personally to the man named Sekaibashi Gabriel."

Haruaki frowned. That strange name belonged to the superintendent of the school where they were studying at. The eccentric with the gas mask. Haruaki's father's old friend.

"A letter—Kono-san, did you find it just now?"

"Yes. This one?"

Konoha took out an envelope from her bosom, one of the articles confiscated when they were changing Un Izoey's clothes. Un Izoey stared at the letter intently and nodded.

"Muu... What business does the Lab Chief's Nation have with that deviant? What are the contents of that letter?"

"My answer: unknown. Not told to me. Not allowed to open the envelope as well. My purpose: deliver the envelope to that man. If I must supplement, I can't say there is no other purpose at all."

"What do you mean by that?"

"My memory: the Lab Chief said: 'There is something you must find out.' About this research theme, it seems this answer can be found during completing this mission. In other words, a secondary purpose. But—after all, there is only one main purpose. Deliver the letter."

Hence—She straightened her back and gazing straight at Konoha, she said:

"My demand: I demand the letter returned."

"I'm very sorry but I cannot agree to your demand so easily... Ueno-san, what's your opinion?"

"If her main purpose really is to deliver the letter, then I hope she can finish her job as quickly as possible and disappear... But we can't risk endangering the superintendent just because of that. The same goes for that research theme which I find utterly unimportant from the bottom of my heart. Yachi, what do you think?"

"Eh? E-Even if you ask me... Well~ I'm thinking that if it's just to hand over the letter, it's not that much of a concern. Think about it, if they wanted to do something bad to the superintendent, there's no need to prepare a letter specifically, right? There's no bomb installed like last time either."

"Right. Based on touch, it really seems like it only contains paper. However, once we know the contents inside, we can decide if we should return this letter or not."

"Not allowed. The Lab Chief did not allow the envelope's opening."

"Do we have any obligation to listen to him?"

Konoha's question caused Un Izoey to narrow her eyes. In the next instant, Haruaki saw a certain dark-skinned object reaching out over the table. Not an arm but a leg. Turning the leg whose knee was originally drawn up, Un

Izoey grabbed a fork from the dining table. Then just as she was sitting up—

"Now now, let's calm down. Kono-san, you should know that peeking at someone else's letter is very rude~"

Kuroe's hair extended swiftly, grabbing Un Izoey's ankle. However, she did not actually need to do this, because Un Izoey was already swaying uncontrollably before her hair touched the ankle.

"Wait... It's dangerous..."

Perhaps because she had not regained her physical strength yet, Un Izoey lost balance and fell sideways. Haruaki reflexively reached out and caught her in his arms. Phew, the weight in his arms turned out lighter than expected.

"Hey Haruaki, don't go near her so easily!"

"N-Now is not the time to be saying that, right?"

While retorting against Fear who had taken out her Rubik's cube, Haruaki looked at Un Izoey's face. Her eyelids were about to close and her eyes were blank and out of focus. Her lips moved slowly.

"Ooh... Ah... Must finish... Lab Chief's... order... My... mission..."

Directed towards no one, her soft murmurs entered Haruaki's ears as though she were talking in a dream. Precisely because of that, Haruaki understood. Right now, before his eyes, there were no lies nor pretense, just simple, earnest, determination—

(She's already this unsteady but still... She's way too serious for her own good.)

The girls must have heard her murmurs too. Fear and Konoha pouted as they watched Un Izoey. But under this mood where there were separate issues at work, in the next instant, Haruaki found himself pulled up by his collar by Fear and the girls, forcibly dragged away from Un Izoey.

Shortly after, Un Izoey blinked forcefully. She had apparently regained a clear consciousness. Waving her hair, Kuroe sat Un Izoey down in her original seat.

After a quick glance at Fear and the others who had almost entered a combat state, Kuroe asked Un Izoey:

"...Have you calmed down? Moving recklessly is not good for your body."

"If there is a need to move, then I must move..."

Un Izoey muttered softly as though forcing her voice out.

"I want to ask you, how do you plan to hand this letter over to the superintendent? Do you know where he is? I've heard that he has quite a number of homes."

"...I give a negative answer. If I go to school, meeting is possible."

"It's not like he's often in school... Especially now that it's the winter vacation."

Haruaki scratched his head. He understood clearly why Fear and the girls were so wary, but he could not help but recall the exceedingly pure and untainted sincerity he felt from her murmurs just now.

"So... Anyway, can I first say what I think? Although she belongs to the Lab Chief's Nation and caused us a lot of trouble in the past, as you can see right now, she's quite frail and powerless. If we ditch her right now, it'll weigh on our conscience. So... As a precondition, I think we can consider letting her live here for now and taking care of her."

Fear and the girls all gave off an air of surprise as though going "Not again." Sensing the mood, Haruaki continued in trepidation:

"Then if we're really concerned about what she's handing over to the superintendent... How should I phrase this? Let's help her deliver the letter to the superintendent as an easy favor, how's that? If the delivery is done in our presence, there's less of a risk. Also, if we don't help contact the superintendent, I think she'll be spending a long time trying to get a hold of him..."

"My confirm: you say you are helping?"

"That's right. Also, excuse me for saying this, but before the letter is delivered to the superintendent's hands, I hope we can hold onto it for now. If you ask why, that's because it's likely you'll run off to find the superintendent on your own if we give the letter back to you. After we

contact the superintendent, we'll return the letter to you when we go meet him together."

After pondering over something for a long time, Un Izoey silently looked up.

"My judgment: if in this case, the letter can hand over to Sekaibashi Gabriel for sure—I think, this method is the only choice."

"Hmm. Umm... Is that okay, Class Rep? Although you might not be too happy about it, the way I see it, this should be able to guarantee everyone's safety and it's the best method to resolve the incident peacefully."

"Absolutely ridiculous. Argghh, absolutely ridiculous. That 'everyone' absolutely does not need to include this girl as well, does it? But whatever. That's the kind of person you are. Since those are your considerations with that precondition in mind, perhaps your method really is the best compromise..."

Closing her eyes, Kirika exhaled forcefully. Konoha also performed virtually the same action.

"The usual excessively nice guy has entered the stage again huh... I can't be responsible for how things will turn out."

"Agreed, I'm aghast too. However, there is no other way now. And from my point of view, if we evict her from our home now, it'll be troublesome—Don't get the wrong idea, it's nothing benevolent like worrying about her recovery. This girl has other uses."

"Fear, what do you mean?"

Fear swiveled the Rubik's cube she had just taken out, producing a series of clicking noises.

"Basically, the 'Santa Hunter' incident. The culprit is the Draconian who attacked her, right? Also, it's not evident that this Draconian has given up on her. It's possible that she might come to challenge her again... When that happens, isn't that a perfect chance to catch the culprit? This girl can serve as bait."

"Bait isn't really a nice word... But true, the enemy may not have given up. We need to consider that."

"This really leaves us no choice. That means we'll need to stay home all the time while taking care of her? Meanwhile, we also need to help with handing the letter over to the superintendent as well as staying on alert against attacks from the Draconian who is likely to be the 'Santa Hunter'."

Konoha turned her highly wary gaze toward Un Izoey and continued:

"Regardless, during your stay in this home, we will monitor you continuously. Although we agree to help you, please do not misunderstand. We have not lowered our guard against you."

"Understood... Yes."

Nodding lightly, Un Izoey's head began to sway forwards and backwards unsteadily. She was probably feeling unwell again. Trying to force herself to fight in such a condition was truly reckless beyond measure.

"H-Hey, are you okay? It's not like we can contact the superintendent instantly. Besides, you can't move around in your current state, right? Go back and sleep first. I'll bring the medicine later."

"Affirmative..."

"Seriously, it'll be troublesome if you faint along the way, so let me accompany you back to the room... Kuroe-san, could you come along as well? She seems to have sweated quite a lot, so we'll need to wipe her body and help her change."

"Okay okay~ Looks like the secret exploration of a dark-skinned body is about to start again~"

Leaning against Konoha's shoulder, Un Izoey stood up with Kuroe following behind inexplicably happily. At this moment, Fear spoke towards Un Izoey's back as though she had suddenly recalled something:

"Wait. Although it's nothing important, I want to ask you a question. What is this thing in your possession?"

Saying that, she took out the metallic cube. Like the letter in Konoha's hand, this was found last night among her belongings.

Un Izoey looked as though its existence had not crossed her mind until now. Turning back for a glance, she spoke with a disinterested expression:

"My memory: perhaps it's something unintentionally taken from the Draconian last night. Cannot remember clearly what happened."

"Hmph... In that case, what's its purpose? Originally, I felt a subtle sense of closeness to it because it bears the same shape as me... But after staring at it all night, I keep feeling there's some other reason. Vaguely, I can feel that it seems to have a cursed aura. Is it a cursed tool?"

"...Probably. What object it is, this question has no clear answer. However, I seem to have heard last night's enemy say this—An object for realizing mankind's greatest wish. Concretely speaking, no doubt—"

Un Izoey half-closed her eyes as though recalling her memories.

Then she spoke quietly:

"—A cube for bringing the dead back to life."

Part 2

Knees drawn up to her chest, Fear was sitting on the chilly veranda.

She was holding a cube in her hands. A cube that shared the same shape as her yet seemingly possessed completely different properties. Holding it up before her eyes, she could also see the storeroom in the garden.

Fear recalled her memories of Tateoka Aiko. A fellow member of their kind, shy and timid, burdened by similar crimes, she was a girl who likewise hoped to lift her curse. Due to choosing amnesia as the means to reach salvation, she had joined the Family, but in the end—

Fear clutched the cube tightly. At this moment, she heard footsteps behind her.

"Fear, aren't you cold?"

"...No. Have you called Zenon's side?"

She asked directly without turning her head. Haruaki proceeded to sit on the veranda.

"Yeah, I made the phone call. Same old. The superintendent can't be located, but at least I've reported the situation to Zenon-san. She says she can visit us later."

"Really? What about things at the cake shop?"

They had agreed to work there not only for yesterday but also the three days before Christmas. In fact, they were originally scheduled to work this afternoon, but Un Izoey could not be left unattended at home. That said, a total cancel at the last minute would be too unreasonable, hence—

"I've made a phone call to apologize already. When I asked the shopkeeper if it's okay for Kuroe to substitute for us, he immediately replied 'That's great too!' As expected of the shopping street's idol."

"Hmm, it feels like we're pushing everything on Kuroe, that makes me feel bad. But thank goodness that's handled. So, what about tomorrow...? If only everything could be resolved today."

Fear nodded lightly and murmured. She could feel Haruaki casting his gaze towards the cube in her hand. After a pause as though hesitating—

"Hey... Do you think it's true?"

"Who knows. A claim made by a Draconian and passed along by a member of the Lab Chief's Nation? It's a completely untrustworthy game of telephone. Even if it's true, we don't know how to use it. Besides—"

"...Besides?"

"I said I felt a cursed presence from it, right? If it's a cursed tool, then using it will definitely cause something bad! I don't want to use a cursed tool to do anything at all!"

"Well... That's true."

Fear deliberately suppressed her emotional tone of voice and whispered:

"Besides... This thing has nothing to do with me. Absolutely nothing. Because Aiko... She's not dead."

That's true too—Haruaki murmured again.

The concept of "life" for them was an unknown even to themselves. Do broken objects have awareness? As an object, do their auto-repair functions still operate? Even if their proper forms were regenerated, will they recover consciousness again? Will they obtain human form again? —Even Fear herself did not know the current state of things. However,

precisely because of that, precisely because it was unknown—Hence, Aiko was not dead.

Definitely.

"...Able to realize mankind's greatest wish huh...?"

Staring at the cube, Fear suddenly chuckled wryly. Feeling Haruaki's intrigued gaze, she explained:

"Jeez, the situation has become incomprehensible. This is my first time experiencing Christmas which only comes around once a year. I was thinking of working hard to the max and enjoy myself to the max... But nothing ever goes smoothly. I was thinking I finally found Santa, but I ended up finding some other trouble. In the end, we even have to help take care of an enemy who may or may not be an enemy. Neither have we caught the 'Santa Hunter.' Not only that... I even noticed accidentally."

"Noticed... what?"

Fear leaned back and lay down on the veranda. She could see the sky overhead, clear and blue yet chilly, completely unlike yesterday.

"Just as I explained to Un Izoey, Christmas is a day of miracles when Santa Claus fulfills people's wishes in the form of presents, right? But even Santa cannot fulfill my greatest wish. Simply hoping for that kind of present is already a waste of effort."

Fear chuckled:

"Also... I accidentally discovered that I have two greatest wishes. Greedy as I am, perhaps Santa Claus was never going to come in the first place..."

"...Of course not."

Haruaki denied curtly and pressed his fingers lightly against Fear's head, spinning it.

Since he did not ask, Fear concluded that Haruaki already knew what her wishes were.

She had a wish. A wish that she had hoped for since centuries ago. Namely, to lift her curse and atone for the past.

Another wish was born merely months earlier—She wished to see that girl again, a certain fellow cursed tool.

Fear really wanted to see her again.

Belonging to the cube that had murdered countless people to this date, her fingers stroked the surface of the cube that was allegedly capable of bringing the dead back to life. Nevertheless, she still had absolutely no idea how to use it.

"In the end, this is a cursed tool that I don't know how to use, don't want to use, or need to use. It is completely irrelevant to me and I'm totally uninterested. So right now, I will start with things that I can do. In other words, I'll take care of that country girl until she recovers and assist her in delivering the letter to the superintendent."



"Hmm, you're completely right. No amount of thinking will help when faced with a tool of unknown origin... So, let me brew some tea to bring over."

It felt like Haruaki was deliberately stretching and speaking in a lively tone of voice. Fear remained lying on the veranda and waved her hand as if dismissing him.

"Hurry hurry. I demand hot~ tea, together with rice crackers of course! Since Kirika is here, the quantity must be higher than usual too!"

Yes yes—As Haruaki left with a wry smile, Fear cast her gaze back to the cube again. She really did not feel like she needed this thing. Cursed tools always caused tragedies and misfortune, hence she was not going to use it. Tateoka Aiko was only in deep slumber, not dead, so there was no need to use it. Simply that.

However, in that case—

Why was she still clutching this cube so tightly even now? Why did she not destroy or discard it?

She should have done that. This once belonged to an enemy but was completely unnecessary to her own side. Its mere existence was ominous. Even if she destroyed or discarded it, no one would complain. Nevertheless, why—

"...Isn't it obvious? It's because this is a clue to the enemy. The enemy could very well come in an attempt to take it back. Like the country girl, this is bait for drawing out the enemy..."

Fear murmured to herself as she carelessly stuffed the cube into her pocket. Actually, there was no need to say this out loud, right? ...She realized after half a beat later. She knew that there was not a soul nearby.

Indeed, this was almost as though—

Almost as though she were trying to convince herself, wasn't it?

Part 3

While they took turns in watching over Un Izoey, time was ticking away by the second. After several hours passed since noon, Haruaki's cellphone rang—Not long after Kuroe had just set off from home to work part-time in their stead.

After the phone conversation, Haruaki nodded and walked to the guest room. Under the watchful gazes of Konoha, who was reading a book in boredom, and Kirika, Haruaki knelt down by the pillow side and examined Un Izoey's face.

"Ah~ ...How are you feeling."

"My answer: I give an answer of much better. I'm already fine."

"There is nothing more unreliable than a patient's claim of 'I'm fine'... Whatever. There will be a visitor later, are you able to get up for a while?"

"...Visitor?"

"You want to hand the letter to the superintendent, right?"

In response to Haruaki's question, her eyes blinked repeatedly without any emotional fluctuation. Then she breathed out.

"...Many thanks."

A smile appeared on the corners of her lips. She really felt relieved at the prospects of completing the mission that Yamimagari Pakuaki had assigned to her. That was the message her face appeared to convey. It was an extremely natural expression that seemed to reinforce the sincerity expressed by her murmurs this morning.

At this moment, Un Izoey began to produce a rustling noise as she tried to get out of the futon. Haruaki frantically stopped her.

"Hold on, it'll take a while first, so it's okay for you to continue lying down. I'll let you know when the visitor arrives."

"My sleep: cannot sleep because I want to sleep too much..."

"Honestly, your words completely baffle me, but I think I get what you mean."

"My wish: occupy some time briefly. Can I ask you some questions?"

If it's something that I know—Haruaki answered.

"—What kind of person is Sekaibashi Gabriel?"

"That's quite a difficult question to answer. Summed up in a single word... He's an eccentric, I guess. Also, he's always wearing a gas mask and he keeps flying all over the world."

"Why? I question."

Even if you ask me, I don't know. Haruaki tried to seek assistance from Konoha and Kirika by gesturing with his eyes.

"Hmph... Same old deal here. You're filled with desire for the 'unknown'? Absolutely ridiculous."

"Regarding the gas mask's explanation, the superintendent himself has changed his tune on multiple occasions... The same goes for his reasons for traveling abroad. Although he says it's work, every time I ask him, he ends up giving all sorts of answers like purchasing timber or buying real estate. I really have no idea what his main occupation is."

"Maybe he operates what's known as diversified businesses? Since he's seldom at school, running the school probably isn't his main occupation, right? Apart from that... His hobby is collecting things that feel like cursed tools. Stated bluntly, he collects fake cursed tools."

"What is meant by collecting fake cursed tools?"

"Because he lacks a discerning eye for these things, none of what he collected are cursed tools."

"It would be too dangerous if he actually finds authentic cursed tools. I can't really approve of it. Although I've reminded him frequently already..."

"A rich man's entertainment generally meshes well with the sense of excitement. On the other hand, I would consider a hobby of collecting abstract paintings of indiscernible meaning much more tasteful. How absolutely ridiculous."

Konoha and Kirika must be quite bored too and offered their comments as appropriate. Perhaps as a way to express their determination in refusing to lower their guard towards Un Izoey, it felt like they were mainly speaking to Haruaki.

Un Izoey's expression was quite lost but she nodded with great interest as she listened to their conversation. Then she stopped her movements as though she had a sudden realization. Just as Haruaki tilted his head in puzzlement—

"My request: I hope to borrow notebook and pencil. If possible, a string as well."

"Eh? Sure, that's no problem... Is a mechanical pencil okay?"

"Just my wish. If possible, pencil is better. The lead doesn't break."

Haruaki walked over to the living room, found a worn pencil and a small notebook in a cupboard and returned to the guest room. Un Izoey ended up weaving the string through the notebook's metallic coil binding and hanging it around her neck like a necklace. Seeing as this look resembled a certain someone, naturally, Kirika frowned with annoyance.

Holding the pencil in a fist like a kindergarten child, Un Izoey wrote down certain words forcefully in the notebook. Haruaki tried peeking a few times, only to see wobbly words written with excessive force: "gas mask," "abroad," "fake cursed tools"... Where had he seen this type of writing before? On further thought, Haruaki figured it out. This handwriting resembled the kind used by kidnappers for ransom notes or eccentric thieves for announcing their crimes beforehand. The extremely atrocious handwriting resulted in a bizarre script. Clearly, she was still learning how to write in addition to speaking Japanese.

"Uh... What is that?"

"My guess: is it this? What the Lab Chief means by something I must find out."

Speaking of which, she did mention that earlier. Apart from her letter delivering mission, Pakuaki had also given her the research theme of 'There is something you must find out.'

"Just from hearing this information, Sekaibashi Gabriel still has many unknowns. Considering the orders are related to this man, I predict that this prediction is very likely to be true."

Despite the blank and expressionless look on her face, Un Izoey murmured incomprehensibly then stared intently at Haruaki.

"Your pleading kind of gaze is making me awkward... But this is all we know about him."

"How absolutely ridiculous. There's completely no need for him to ask you to investigate this kind of information. There must be loads of people in the

other labs who are suited to this kind of work and skilled in espionage operations."

"No necessarily. The Lab Chief's profound intents are very profound."

"No matter what you want to investigate, so long as you do not harm those people, do whatever you want. But conversely—If you dare try to harm them, we will stop you with everything we've got."

"My denial: completely no intention of doing that. If I intend to harm, I fear the recipient might not agree to receive the letter."

"I hope so."

Just as Konoha narrowed her eyes and spoke, the doorbell happened to ring.

Un Izoey instantly lifted the blanket and got up to her feet. The time to finish her mission had finally arrived—That was the determination conveyed by her gaze. However, she had apparently undressed under the blanket, leaving nothing on her lower body except a pair of panties.

Part 4

This meant that one troublesome matter could draw to an end—That was what Haruaki originally thought.

But Un Izoey's statement completely surprised everyone.

"I cannot hand it over."

"What?"

Faced with Haruaki's exclamation of surprise, she remained unmoved. Leaning against the living room table where she was seated, she stared at the two people on the opposite end—namely, the superintendent's secretary, Hyoujou Zenon, accompanied by the school physician, Hyoujou Ganon, for some reason. Zenon had been working on official matters at school and happened to pass by the Yachi residence on her way home. Apparently, Ganon was also at school and came along.

"Hmm... What is going on? I heard that there was a letter for the superintendent?"

The beautiful secretary asked in her usual calm tone of voice.

"I insist on my insistence that I cannot hand it to a proxy."

On the other hand, Un Izoey simply answered with simple and easily understood explanation.

"My memory: the Lab Chief said I must hand it to Sekaibashi Gabriel personally."

"But... I have already told Yachi-sama that the superintendent currently cannot be contacted, even by us. He should be working overseas currently, so we can only await his return... I think leaving the letter in our safekeeping for now is the most practical solution."

"Understood, but denied."

Crap. Haruaki originally thought that anything involving the superintendent could be easily resolved by asking Zenon for assistance but forgot to consider whether this method was acceptable for Un Izoey.

"Zenon-san, do you know when the superintendent will be back?"

"My utmost apologies, I do not know of any set date."

"Nyahaha, this is usually how he acts~ Then all you can do is wait patiently for his return. However, I don't think it's possible that he'll return before the year end."

Contrasting sharply with Zenon who was sitting formally in seiza, Ganon was sitting lazily with her legs outstretched. In her usual, relaxed attitude, she said: "By the way, the feeling of tatami is really great~ I keep wanting to sleep... Going to work on holidays is really so tiring~" Then she collapsed on the floor comfortably on her own. Every time he saw them together, Haruaki could not help but wonder, why were this pair of sisters so unlike?

"...You absolutely must hand it to him personally no matter what?"

"My answer: I absolutely must hand it over to him personally no matter what. By the way, what does 'absolutely' mean?"

Haruaki exhaled with a sigh.

"Then it can't be helped. You can try waiting a few more days. If he's back during this time, that's obviously the best, but if he's not, we'll have to make a decision then."

"Haruaki-kun, here you go again... Because you said the letter will be delivered, I already gave it back to her."

"Muu, maybe I'm worrying too much but this means we've lost one thing that we can hold hostage."

"My declaration: I will not attack them. Repeat again, I repeat that I have not received orders of that kind."

"Hmph... Who knows. How absolutely ridiculous."

Watching Un Izoey hug the letter tightly as she spoke, Kirika's attitude remained unchanged. Eyeing their reactions doubtfully, Zenon nodded lightly.

"In any case, I am sorry for failing to provide actual help. If you insist on waiting for the superintendent's return, we are unable to make any comments on this decision... Then once we learn of his return date, we shall immediately inform you. When the time comes, contacting Yachi-sama is fine, I presume?"

"A cellphone... You probably don't have one, right?"

Haruaki looked towards Un Izoey. Just as expected, she shook her head from side to side.

"Well then, sorry for your trouble, Zenon-san. Anyway, it's decided, thank you for your help."

"I originally thought I'd only have to put up with this until her injuries healed, but now I feel as though the duration this person needs to be protected has inexplicably lengthened... So in the end, our days of labor and worrying will persist until the superintendent's return?"

"I-I don't think we need to worry that much... But Konoha, I'm sorry for troubling you every single time."

"No, it's not so serious that you need to apologize to me. Besides, I'm very happy to be troubled by you..."

"I guess the same goes for Class Rep. You're feeling worried or troubled, right? From your standpoint, Class Rep, getting rid of her as quickly as possible should be what you wish, right? ...Sorry."

"No, I'm the one causing you trouble instead, umm... Suddenly arriving uninvited and even imposing myself on your hospitality."

"Don't sweat that kind of small stuff. Anyway, school is on holiday right now, so feel free to live here however long as you want."

"R-Really? But even if you say it's fine for me to live here however long I want, I still find it troubling..."

Kirika turned her gaze away and murmured awkwardly and inexplicably. Haruaki looked up at the living room clock.

"Well then, since it happens to be three, let's have afternoon snack time. Since I'm sorry that Zenon-san and Ganon-san had to come all this way deliberately... Please stay here for tea before leaving."

"Well then—We shall not refuse your hospitality. Also, Onee-sama, you need to mind your manners."

"Don't worry~ Having entered someone's home already, with tea offered to us already, this is basically that... Like a family visit. Since the school physician isn't in charge of those, this is quite a new experience. This could very well be the most teacher-like I've ever felt since starting this job~"

With Ganon lying flat on the tatami lazily, her words sounded completely unconvincing. Rather, no matter how one interpreted it, Ganon sounded like she were confessing that her "usual work was even less teacher-like than when teachers went on family visits."

Yes, she's Ganon-san after all—Convincing himself with minimal effort, Haruaki went to the kitchen. After he started preparing tea and snacks, footsteps of two people sounded behind him.

"Eh, what's up?"

"Perhaps an occupational habit, I cannot allow myself to stay inactive whenever I see tea being brewed. Please allow me to assist."

Guests should sit and wait—As much as Haruaki wanted to say that, he could understand that uncomfortable feeling. If this could actually help her relax instead, he did not want to coerce her.

"Then... Thank you for your troubles. But then, even Ganon-san is also...?"

"No no no, as embarrassing as it is to admit, I am very unskilled in these trivial but tiresome tasks. I'm simply very bored so I'd like to ask if I may explore your house a bit? May I?"

"Sure... But there's nothing interesting to look at. Oh, if you do happen to see anything weird, please try not to touch them. Or rather, I should say please avoid as much as possible those room with weird objects inside."

"Yes yes yes~ Understood. I just find stuff like tatami and sliding doors very nostalgic. Ahhh, how I really feel like spending a day doing nothing, just wandering in a house like this~"

Ganon swayed as she walked out of the kitchen. Haruaki and Zenon resumed preparing the tea and snacks. In any case, rice crackers had to be prepared for sure, but having just a single type of snack seemed too bland. Hence, Zenon decided to make pancakes that she had not made for a long time already. Haruaki handed an apron over to her and shared the task.

"..."

Beside him, wearing an apron, Zenon was quietly at work with a calm expression. The sight of this appearance of hers felt rather new to Haruaki. Somehow, he felt his heart rate increasing. After all, he seldom had opportunities to do this kind of work together with an older woman.

These quiet times did not last long. Feeling someone's gaze behind him, Haruaki looked back.

"...(staring~)"

"Woah! Un Izoey, what's the matter...?"

"My intention: I offer my wish to help."

She peered at Zenon as she spoke. Although Haruaki did not think a person like her would be suitable for this kind of housework... Why would she suddenly make this sort of offer? Haruaki wondered as he took a more careful look, only to find her holding a pencil against the notebook hanging round her neck in preparation.

"Is it... Because of your guess that the superintendent is what you're supposed to find out about? Hmm, compared to us, I guess Zenon-san or Ganon-san might know more details. But trying to dig the truth out of guests, that's a bit too..."

"My question: I calmly ask what you're talking about. Unable to comprehend your incomprehensible comment. Because there is no need to mind, I will help by helping."

Only now did Haruaki notice, but Konoha was also standing behind her.

"This person needs to be monitored closely at all times. Besides, I was thinking of helping you in the first place. May I?"

"I don't think I really need that many people here... Oh well, whatever."

"Hold it right there~! Speaking of helping out, count me in as well! Having honed my skills day in and day out nonstop, I must prove that I'm more useful than this country girl who just arrived in the city! I won't lose!"

Next, Fear also showed up in the kitchen, motivated by a strange spirit of competition. Then immediately—

"Yachi, I won't miss out on this excellent chance to steal your cooking secrets. I will also help."

"Even you too, Class Rep? Clearly, this place is overcrowded now!"

But for some reason, no one paid Haruaki any attention. The simple pancake making task instantly turned into chaos.

"My request: teach me what I should do."

"Well... Could you help wash the dishes that we'll need to use next? Those ones over in the cupboard there."

"Understood."

"Eh, don't hold them with your foot when washing them!"

Currently, Un Izoey had her pants casually tied around her waist. With her foot stretched out on the kitchen counter, moving about while holding a dish, it really was quite dangerous.

"My judgment: feet are not dirty. Also, dishes end up washed by water anyway, therefore no problem."

"I'm not stopping you because it's dirty. Say, you're doing it this way because you're using the notebook...?"

"I ask what are you talking about. Next, the subject of conversation will be casual chatting during housework, no special meaning—By the way, please tell me Sekaibashi Gabriel's age."

"Wha...?"

"How is that casual chatting at all? You're being way too direct!"

The chaos was not showing any signs of subsiding. In order to compete, Fear started using her foot to wash the dishes and Haruaki frantically stopped her. While he was frequently glancing at Un Izoey's actions in concern, Konoha went "Oh~ those legs are really exposed for all to see. You haven't forgotten the earlier lesson, have you...?" and her hands started to take action—Under such chaotic conditions, making sufficient pancakes for everyone was truly quite a miracle.

"So this is pancake... My comment: the perfect circle shape is truly impressive. It must be very tasty."

"...How is that related to circles?"

"Circular things are tasty things. I have never seen anything circular but not tasty."

"R-Really...?"

Haruaki felt too tired to offer a dose of cynicism. Sighing as he returned to the empty living room, he suddenly felt that something was not right. Speaking of which, he had forgotten about Ganon.

"Is she still taking a walk...? I'll go find her."

Haruaki made a tour of the house but failed to locate Ganon. Where on earth had she gone? Just as he puzzled with his head tilted, he heard an inexplicable sound from his own room. After checking inside—

"Muu... No good~ I can't eat anymore..."

Haruaki found Ganon sleeping in his own futon, presumably tired from her walk, muttering cliched dream talk. Feeling a sudden sense of exhaustion, Haruaki slumped his shoulders dejectedly, thinking to himself: If only my personality allowed me to do as I please like her without caring what anyone thinks, how nice that'd be.

After Zenon and Ganon left, night descended. Inheriting the clear sky from the daytime, the night displayed the moon and the stars in full splendor without a cloud in the sky. Although everyone had eaten dinner and taken a bath already, it was too early to go to bed. During this time of excess leisure, all they could do was wait for this unproductive day to reach a conclusion.

Sitting on the veranda, Kirika was spacing out in deep thought. Her wish was easily summed up by the words "hoping that Un Izoey could leave as soon as possible." However, the situation remained unchanged. Things were still okay before Un Izoey regained consciousness, but the letter delivery issue had caused Zenon and Ganon to make a fruitless trip all because of her obstinacy. How absolutely ridiculous.

(The superintendent will be back eventually. Perhaps time will solve everything...)

However, there was another wish occupying Fear's heart—settling the 'Santa Hunter' matter. The day had passed without any progress. Kirika could empathize with her wish to do things beneficial to humans and to welcome a most wonderful Christmas. As for assisting Fear, Kirika had no objections to that.

(Fear's wish?)

Kirika had a feeling that this was not all. Perhaps there was something that Fear was deliberately trying to stop from showing—Another wish. Recalling that "cube," Kirika shifted her gaze.

Fear and Haruaki were currently inside the storeroom in the garden. The two of them were talking about something while using a towel to wipe a pot that they held like a cherished treasure... Just as Kirika thought to herself—

"Shameless brat, to think you'd stuff your little finger into the crack and thrust in and out, what intentions are you harboring!?"

"I'm just trying to clean out the dust that has accumulated inside!"

Another noisy argument started.

Kirika relaxed her expression. She knew about what had happened and also what they believed. Precisely because they believed, they were not going to dwell upon the matter of the "cube," right? Just at this moment...

"Seriously, those two are just so exasperating..."

Sitting by the veranda, Konoha was likewise watching the scene with a wry expression. However, extremely complicated emotions could be seen in her gaze towards the pot. Sitting on her far side was the dark-skinned girl who was staring out at the starry sky with her usual, blank eyes whose emotional fluctuations were impossible to read.

"My request: I wish to take a walk in the garden."

"As long as you don't do anything weird, be my guest."

Barefooted, Un Izoey walked to the center of the spacious garden. Looking up at the moon, she spread her arms and halted in her steps as though trying to block the cold wind.

Feeling a sudden impulse in her heart, then after an instant's hesitation, Kirika borrowed a pair of sandals from beneath the veranda and walked over to Un Izoey.

"...A clean and pure presence. Earth's energy and air's energy. A comfortable, wonderful place."

Perhaps sensing the person behind her, Un Izoey explained with a light murmur. Was this somehow related to the fact that these grounds facilitated the lifting of curses? Although this idea appeared in Kirika's mind, that was not what she really wanted to ask about.

"You—Why did you join that organization?"

Un Izoey answered without turning her head:

"My memory: that great man came to our tribe. After certain negotiations, the tribe chief promised to give the Lab Chief the staff passed down generations of the tribe. That staff was sealed in a cave in a dangerous jungle. I was given the mission to lead and protect that man until reaching the cave."

"..."

"On the way, that man told me many things. For me who lived only as a warrior and had no doubts about dying as a warrior. Why the sky is blue. How clouds are made. Stories about stars and moon. The lives of people never heard before, in places never seen before. Only then did I know. I know that I know nothing else. Once I know this fact—the world is not the same world as before. I cannot suppress my desire—I recall these recollections."

"That's why you decided to follow that man henceforth? Absolutely ridiculous—Why haven't you realized it!? That man, that organization's abnormality. They are all mad. For the sake of knowing something, they can go as far as to commit murder! Murdering just for the desire to know! That's the kind of place it is!"

Kirika could not help but get worked up. Konoha must have heard her. Perhaps even the two in the storeroom heard her as well. But she did not care.

"Just for living, we sometimes take each other's food, kill other tribe's people. Is this any different? I ask this kind of question."

"Completely different! How absolutely ridiculous!"

"No. I changed after meeting that great man. Realized the surrounding world is full of 'unknowns' and the correct answers existing in it. Very horrifying thing. For me who always thought 'nothing more than this' when looking at the world, death was nothing compared to this horror. Not knowing is unbearable, impossible to survive. 'Knowing' is a kind of food for me now, the buffalo I discovered in the gap between two tribes."

"So for the sake of obtaining knowledge, you don't even care if you harm others!?"

"Of course, what can be avoided should be avoided. However, if what's needed for survival cannot be obtained otherwise—only death awaits. Only this type of people are gathered."

"Impossible to understand. Indeed, impossible to understand! Is knowing really that important!?"

Kirika heard Un Izoey exhale audibly—then turned around. Her gray hair shook lightly while her eyes flashed slightly in the moonlight without any emotional fluctuation.

Then she acted as though trying to prove her claim that "'knowing' was equivalent to sustenance."

To the new "unknown" that was born in this instant, she simply sought an answer in earnest.

"Knowing is very important and very wonderful. My question... In this world, does anything exist which does not need to be known?"

"Hmm..."

Irreconcilable viewpoints—Kirika thought. This girl was probably not a villain. Nevertheless—they were still irreconcilable.

Kirika tightened her fist and turned around.

"Whatever—But don't you forget this. You are our enemy. Don't get me involved and don't approach me. If your side intends to cause trouble to me or the others, prepare yourselves well. No matter how many times it takes, I will curse you. Just like last time, I will make your hands taste the sensation of death, to the point of making you go insane!"

What childish threats. Even Kirika thought so herself. These words were completely meaningless.

However, in the instant just before she left—

"Ah..."

Un Izoey's shoulder suddenly trembled.

An exceptionally fragile expression was seen on Un Izoey's face as she bowed her head like a frightened child.

Part 6

Late night. Originally eyes closed with her back against the wall, Konoha moved her eyelids.

Inside the dark guest room, Konoha was the only one on surveillance duty. Kuroe and Fear were up next as a team, but it was not their time yet. In light of the blanket incident the previous night and considering the need for surveillance rather than medical attention, having Haruaki and the others sleeping here would only increase the risk. Hence, Konoha had bade Haruaki and Kirika rest in other rooms.

Inside this room devoid of light, Konoha watched as the originally sleeping Un Izoey suddenly sat up.

"My question: does this house have pet paruki?"

"I don't understand that word at all, but I know you're trying to say 'cat.' For a human, your senses are quite sharp."

An instant after murmuring an answer, Konoha jumped up. At the same time, she chopped overhead with her hand.

"Stop sneaking around... Down you come!"

She sliced a ceiling board open, causing a black-clad figure who had been sitting upright on the ceiling to fall down. Realizing the situation instantly, the figure maintained balance and used a knees-bent posture to absorb the impact of the fall. Truly superb martial arts.

"Who are you? Name yourself. While you're at it, take off that strange mask."

More correctly, what obscured the figure's head was not a mask but an industrial welding helmet. Too bizarre.

The mysterious intruder did not answer, instead closing in without warning—In that instant, this person's threat level jumped from intruder to attacker. However, the one being attacked was not Konoha but Un Izoey who had just lifted her blanket and stood up. Despite Konoha's many reminders, she was still wearing nothing but panties on her lower body.

The attacker made a beeline for her. Un Izoey narrowed her eyes and lifted her dark-skinned leg, but just as she was preparing to perform a spinning kick—Her body suddenly lost balance. Not because the attacker did something but due to her body tottering uncontrollably again.

(Ahhh, seriously, what the heck is she doing... Does she still have a fever!?)

As though her subsequent intended motions were somehow lost, Un Izoey was tackled by the attacker and pinned to the floor embarrassingly—It could not be helped.

Konoha instantly stepped forward and aimed a karate chop towards the back of the attacker's head, intending to at least break that ludicrous welding helmet to see the person's face. Nevertheless, the attacker realized her intentions and swiftly drew a dagger from a pocket to block Konoha's chopping hand. Indeed, the enemy had intentionally used a dagger to block a barehanded chop. Furthermore, the attacker's target was Un Izoey. There was only one conclusion.

"You're from the Draconians...?"

As though using the momentum from Konoha's chop, the attacker performed a back flip. Crashing into and breaking the sliding door, the attacker swiftly unhatched a window and escaped into the garden. At this moment—

"Are you okay, Konoha-kun!?"

"An enemy!? Although I'm already used to it, but how dare this person sneak into this home? Such audacity. Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi»—Curse Calling!"

"Hmm~ ...This was a rare chance to share a bed with Ficchi~ How dare you interrupt our brief respite? Unforgivable."

Discovering the commotion, everyone got up and came running. First of all, Fear rushed outside as soon as she saw the figure in the strange welding helmet, swinging using the back of the axe.

"Woah...?"

Little did she expect the attacker to parry lightly with a dagger then stumble a few steps. Fear tried again with a horizontal swing, but the result was the same.

The attacker's entire body was swaying with unsteady footsteps. Rather than that gripping the dagger, the fingers seem to be holding it weakly by the fingertips. Even the arm wielding the dagger was dangling sloppily by the side of the body.

"Hmm~ This really resembles the drunken fist."

"Yeah... Instead of competing in power, greater emphasis is placed on countering the opponent's moves—a so-called gentle style of the sword?"

Konoha replied to Kuroe as she followed Fear into the garden where she began to frown.

Because Fear had stopped moving.

However, she seemed to be staring intently at the attacker with inquiring eyes.

Such audacity—Fear thought. To dare sneak into this home, how utterly foolish. I must defeat the enemy completely. Nothing needs to be said.

"Hmph, unlike what I've heard, you're not red at all this time. But lemme still ask you... What is your goal? Are you trying to defeat that country girl to become strong? Or is it—"

Strange. Despite clearly telling herself in her mind to defeat the enemy directly without explanation, why were her lips moving on their own? Why did her arms and legs pause?

"Or perhaps... Your goal is this 'cube'?"

Acting on its own accord, her hand took out the solid cube from her pocket. Now was not the time to be talking about this. While thinking that to herself, another part of her was saying: this is trivial. Indeed, asking a few questions won't hurt. She's just trying to confirm the enemy's goal. Of course.

After Fear presented the cube in her outstretched hand, the silent attacker's shoulder suddenly shook.

Fear thought: Just as expected. Of course—The enemy knows.

The instant these thoughts crossed her mind, Fear began to speak as though under a spell:

"...I knew it, this belongs to you? Although I don't particularly wanna know, please tell me—What is this thing? How is it used? What needs to be done—to resurrect someone!"

She asked the question. Fear was shocked by her own behavior.

This did not need asking. Because she neither wanted nor needed to use this tool. Hence, there was absolutely no need to inquire about its method of usage. But why did she ask?

Thump. Her heart began to hurt.

Filled with indeterminate unease, Fear looked up in trepidation.

Ahhh, could it be that... She had simply failed to notice herself, she was simply mistaken.

In actual fact, she did not completely believe that Aiko was still alive?

(That kind of thing... impossible...!)

Fear felt confused by her emotions, troubled by the thoughts that she could not admit.

"..."

The attacker did not answer. Currently, even Fear herself did not know if she wanted to know the answer or not.

Then—Several seconds later, the enemy took action. Neither answering, nor attacking without answering, a third choice was picked.

The attacker simply—

Turned and ran away.

Of course, Konoha heard what Fear had said. How contradictory—She thought. If she did not want to know, there was no need to ask in the first place. However, she could understand why Fear would give voice to that contradiction.

Even though she believed that Aiko was not dead, even if she believed from the bottom of her heart, what if the truth turned out to be the contrary?—This worry had always existed in her heart. No matter how much she suppressed it, no matter how hard she tried to avoid thinking about it, she definitely struggled in the depths of her heart—A curse akin to thorns.

But unlike Fear, Konoha's level of self-awareness regarding those worries was different, hence the current result. Seeing Fear surprised by her own words, Konoha thought to herself. The difference lay in whether Fear had limited self-awareness or if she subconsciously suppressed it all along. Somewhere in her heart, she had always harbored this notion—If Fear only realized it now, her extreme shock was only natural.

But now was not the time to be pondering such matters. Due to her surprise towards Fear's sudden behavior, Konoha halted all movement for an instant. Using this opportunity, the attacker had already retreated to the boundary wall without saying a word.

"S-She's getting away! What are we gonna do?"

"We won't make any progress if she gets away now. Catch her for interrogation—the «Tragic Black River»!"

"Yes, that's right...! If we want to ask her questions, that can wait until we've caught her! Allow me to draw her attention while you use that capturing move, Kuroe-san—

Just as the girls stepped forward again—

"...! Mode: «Cushioning Munemori»!"

Kuroe's hair shot out to block projectile weapons rather than to capture the enemy. Instantly extended, the sleek hair covered Haruaki and Kirika like a waterfall while Konoha halted in her steps. Several throwing knives flew in from the darkness, striking the position where she was about to step into.

"Another enemy?"

Perhaps due to excellent presence concealment, Konoha was unable to instantly pinpoint the location of the person who had thrown the knives. Due to this impedance, everything was too late. The enemy in the welding helmet had already jumped over the wall. Attempting to stop her, Fear was also attacked by the throwing knives, providing the enemy with the chance to disappear into the darkness effortlessly. As much as they wanted to give chase, the critical problem was not knowing where the new enemy was located. They had to take precautions in case Haruaki was ambushed in an unguarded moment. For the next while, they all searched the surroundings for presences carefully.

"...Looks like they're gone. How troubling. They escaped?"

Konoha sighed and relaxed the tension in her shoulders. Fear still gripped the "cube" tightly while gazing at the top of the wall where the enemy had disappeared. Her eyes were wavering with a myriad of emotions. Even Konoha could not discern what feelings were currently contained in there. Was she disturbed by her own behavior, regretting the lack of answers, or simply still ill at ease—

"Fear..."

"Muu—N-No, actually I... Really... Don't care about this cube at all. It's just a spontaneous question, because it feels so uncomfortable not knowing the other side's goal. Hmph, that's all there is to it!"

Hearing Haruaki call out to her, Fear turned her face away as though trying to hide something with displeasure. Virtually everyone present already understood what she was trying to hide—But no one spoke.

Fear swung the axe, but this time, her displeasure was not meant to hide something. She continued talking:

"However, the enemy's movements are really annoying! Soft and squishy all over, I can't believe how hard to handle it was. Had I known, I should have switched to a different torture tool earlier—Uumu, but that might have given her an opening to escape. Arghh, damn it, it was clearly a perfect chance to catch the 'Santa Hunter'!"

However, Un Izoey spoke up in her expressionless face as usual:

"Wrong."

"...What?"

"I say and repeat again: wrong. That is not the person attacking me last time."

She started blankly at Haruaki's group as they reacted in surprise.

She even cocked her head and asked them:

"Then who were they?"

...That's what we'd like to ask you too.

Chapter 3 - Him and the Children, the Numbers Problem / "Kokoro the Red-Wearer hunter"

Part 1

The next morning, Kirika entered the washroom to wash her face. Due to the commotion during the night, she was lacking in sleep to some extent, but since this was his home, she definitely could not allow him to see any sleepy looks from her. To be honest, she was still quite unsettled about sleeping in the same room as him the night before yesterday. Hopefully, she had not said anything weird in her dreams.

Checking out the clean washroom, she thought to herself again: This is his home. Thinking that this situation was a very precious experience, she carelessly turned her gaze around, finally stopping at the sink. Toothpaste and other toiletries were arranged neatly in front of the mirror. Standing there were a total of four toothbrushes.

(Fear-kun's, Konoha-kun's, Kuroe-kun's—and his.)

Every time she came across traces of his daily life, Kirika could not help but feel her heart jump. A jump of joy.

At this moment, Kirika noticed the towel rack on the wall. Along this long bar of stainless steel, a number of bath towels were hung. On the surface of the wall above each towel, there was a sticker with a name on it.

The instant she saw his name on one of the stickers, she felt an illusion as though her blood's temperature were rising rapidly.

Click—She could feel a certain switch activate inside her body.

By the time she regained her senses, Kirika was already crouching in front of that sticker.

(Wait a sec, hold it right there.)

The last vestiges of rationality whispered in her mind. What on earth was she trying to do?

(Absolutely ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. How absolutely ridiculous—)

But... but... indeed.

It was not like someone was watching.

It was not like it would cause anyone trouble.

Just once, if only just once—

"..."

Kirika reached out in hesitation, her fingertips touching the fluffy fabric of the towel. The towel remained hanging on the rack. Slowly, she pulled it while bringing her face towards it at the same time.

She had already admitted to the feelings in her heart. Kirika no longer intended to deceive herself. However, she knew it would be extremely difficult. No, more correctly, this was virtually impossible. There was absolutely no way. Very likely, even the act of wishing itself was a futile endeavor in overestimating oneself. This was decided a long time ago. To be honest, it felt like her mind would go weird if she pondered the issue any deeper.



Precisely because of that, she needed a mental stabilizer once in a while. This current act was precisely a stabilizer. No big deal. Absolutely, she had no intention of doing anything perverted like sniffing.

She simply pressed her cheek against it. Indeed, pressing with her cheek, she allowed her skin to feel that soft texture.

Only wanting to experience a feeling akin to skin contact with him—

That was all, hence—

"Good morning, Class Rep. What's with you?"

"Heeooh—!"

Intending to wash his face, Haruaki had gone to the washroom and found someone inside already. For some reason, Kirika was clutching a towel that was hanging on the wall, staring intently at it. After he called to her, she cried out in surprise and turned around at the same time. With speed fast enough to leave afterimages behind, she let go of the towel and jumped aside, pressing herself against the wall with her face all red. Haruaki had no intention of startling her.

"Y-Yachi, this... umm..."

"That's the towel I normally use... Oh right, I must have forgotten to mention. The towels for guests are kept in this cupboard."

"N-No. I brought my own towel. I was just about to wash my face. Aside from that, I was not doing anything. Truly, absolutely without a doubt. Uh... Just now, that, right... I-It's the texture. Indeed! This towel looked especially fluffy to me, so I was curious if it's a towel made from a special fabric, very curious...!"

"This is probably a normal towel I received as a midyear gift from the Bon Festival or some other occasion... Is it because of the fabric softener? The one we always use is that jar we keep by the washing machine."

"I-Is that so? Hmm... I see now, that's a lesson learnt. The mystery is completely solved. Then let me wash my face now!"

Splash splash~ Kirika scooped up cold water brusquely and splashed it onto her face. Nothing less expected of the class representative, starting

the day with a refreshing and wide-awake beginning. Even in the act of washing her face, she's full of vigor—Haruaki was secretly impressed.

After Kirika finished washing her face, it was Haruaki's turn at the sink. However, he could sense Kirika still behind him, wiping her face. Just as he felt intrigued—

"In the end... Who do think those people were last night?"

"Hmm~ I don't know either... Most likely more of the Draconians, right?"

"Yeah. It's possible that they're taking action as a team like Satsuko and Fourteen, or similar to the Knights. But then it still doesn't make total sense."

Haruaki turned his gaze up and used the mirror to look at Kirika behind him. She was narrowing her eyes with a grave expression.

"The Draconians are members of an organization that seeks 'strength.' However, that doesn't correspond with the attacker's attitude last night. Doesn't it seem like they ran away too quickly? If seeking strength, namely by fighting Un Izoey to improve their abilities, then they should've been fine with fighting more aggressively. But last night, they didn't do that."

"In other words, they had other goals...?"

"Presumably. Logically speaking, taking back that 'cube' is probably their goal. However... Under those circumstances, running away immediately as soon as the tide turned unfavorable, that's really quite unnatural."

"Hmm... Now that you mention it, I agree too. But apart from that, there's no other reason for Un Izoey to be targeted, right? See, even that Fourteen said something like 'fleeing is a type of strength'—Perhaps that's what's going on?"

"Hmm, that's probably the most reasonable explanation. Perhaps I'm overthinking things?"

Kirika exhaled. Haruaki finished washing his face and wiped his face with his own towel. Hmm, this towel really cannot be more ordinary. He did not find it particularly fluffy.

"No matter what, in order to resolve the current situation, defeating the Draconians is imperative. Conversely, once the Draconians are defeated, everything will be resolved. That girl is just waiting patiently for the

superintendent's return and is also related to resolving the 'Santa Hunter' incident... If there's anything else we want to know, I'm sure we can get it out of the defeated enemies."

Anything else probably meant that cube, right? This was rather concerning, but once they knew how to use it, what was he going to do?

Haruaki could not help but ask this question in his mind as a sudden sense of heavy suffering filled his heart.

He was rather concerned? Why? And for what purpose?

The worries he usually avoided thinking about were rising to the surface horrifically. These were the worries that had surfaced in his mind involuntarily a number of times ever since that sports festival. Every time, he had tried as much as possible to not think about them, suppressing the worries in the depths of his heart all along.

What if Aiko never woke up again—

Enough. Stop thinking about it. Just as he had done repeatedly so far, Haruaki tried his hardest to stop thinking. But right now, he could not help but think even more. Precisely because of the current situation, he had to think.

If Aiko were actually dead, then the only way to see her again would be resurrection. In other words, only by relying on that 'cube'—

(...That's wrong, that kind of thing... I don't want to use a cursed tool at all, besides... No, because, Aiko must still be alive.)

Haruaki desperately tried to avoid thinking of that troubling possibility. At the same time, he felt that Fear must be experiencing the same thing. I don't want to use a cursed tool to do anything at all. Fear had said that. But still, she was curious about the cube, even so, she could not know the answer to the question: what would she do once she knew how to use it? No idea. Just like him, Fear surely did not know the answer—Because last night, she did not ask the question intentionally, instead, it had slipped out involuntarily. Otherwise, she would not have made a troubled expression that seemed to say "I can't believe I asked such a question."

However, Fear resumed her usual demeanor after that, acting as though she had completely forgotten the cube already, forgotten the question she

had asked. Haruaki also imitated her and cast the unanswered question about the cube aside. Currently, he needed to come up with a better plan.

"...Yachi, is something wrong?"

Kirika's gaze showed worry as she watched him. Haruaki deliberately relaxed the tension in his face.

"No... Nothing at all. So in the end, we can only wait for them to show up on their own?"

"Who knows. It's best if simply waiting can solve the issue... Hmm, but right now, talking about the future won't help. Let's discuss with everyone later."

"That's right. Anyway, let's discuss during breakfast."

"Yes, I'll help too. Call me when you're preparing to cook."

Saying that, Kirika was just about to leave the washroom. Suddenly, she stopped in the middle of her tracks.

"That reminds me. Greetings are very important, so let me say this again: Good morning, Yachi. Also—"

Seeming quite embarrassed, Kirika did not face Haruaki as she continued speaking:

"It's absolutely ridiculous to say this under the current situation. But still... Merry Christmas."

Watching Kirika as she left the washroom, Haruaki was reminded. Come to think of it...

The date for today was December 24.

Christmas Eve.

Part 2

Konoha and Kirika were helping with breakfast preparations together. Just as they carried Haruaki's cooking out to the table—

"Haruaki-kun is so slow... May I go take a look?"

"Yes, thank you for your trouble. Leave the rest to me."

Leaving Kirika with the task of serving the food to the table, Konoha walked over to the guest room. Currently, Fear and Kuroe were in charge of monitoring and it was difficult to imagine what sort of abnormal scene might have happened... If all Haruaki did was go inform everyone to come eat breakfast, why did it take him so long to return? What happened?

Hence, just as Konoha was walking along the corridor, she heard a noise coming from the guest room. She had no choice but to withdraw her earlier statement. This was precisely a noise announcing some sort of abnormal scene.

"Ohoh... Ooh... Oh... Th-This is..."

"Feel good? I ask this question."

"V-Very... pleasurable..."

Konoha's heart skipped a beat violently. These were Haruaki and Un Izoey's voices. What? What was going on in the guest room? Why was he making such an excited and—literally, just as he described—pleasurable sound?

Konoha quickened her pace. Rather, she had started sprinting before she knew it. During this time, the voices persisted.

"How about harder?"

"O-Ooh... Woah! Th-That's... too hard."

"—My apology: really sorry. Then what about this kind of feeling—"

"Ooh, ahhh. Y-You're really amazing... Also... To think you're using your feet..."

Using feet! Th-That is such a... high-level... act of indecency! Unforgivable! What are those two doing in spite of their monitoring duties? Just as Konoha furious arrived at the door—

"N-Nuu... Shameless brat, that expression on your face is really too shameless...!"

"That's right, Ficchi. If you're free, why don't you join in as well, Ficchi?"

"Fufufu. Really? That also seems like fun. Then I'll use my feet as well... Put yours here and press like this... Knead it like this...!"

"Hold on. It's too dangerous if you're doing it...!"

"How about that, does this kneading feel nice? Hmph, seriously, speaking of you..."

"O-Oh...? W-Wait a sec, Fear, you're way too violent!"

Clearly on the scene yet making no effort to stop it, no, even going as far as to participate. What are those two thinking!?

"Th-This ends now—! I absolutely forbid you all from engaging in this debauchery any longer!"

Konoha opened the sliding door violently. The first thing she saw was Kuroe enthusiastically watching the scene ahead—

"Hmm?"

"G-Getting crushed... The insides... about to spill out..."

Haruaki was convulsing, lying sprawled face down on the floor while Fear was stepping on him in her thigh high socks, rather happily at that.

And also—

"—Another person deserving gratitude? I must offer my service."

While stepping on Haruaki's arm to massage him, Un Izoey calmly proposed.

Back in the living room with breakfast prepared, Haruaki was looking straight ahead at Konoha groaning while pressing on her temples.

"You people have no sense of wariness whatsoever, do you..."

"She doesn't have any weapons after all. Also, as long as either Ficchi or I are unrestrained, she can't possibly make a weird move. Since she said she wanted to thank us, we were thinking if it's better to let her do something~"

"Ahhh, enough... If she must do something, just have her wash dishes with her feet or something, jeez."

Although Haruaki had done nothing wrong, seeing Konoha pouting while muttering, he judged it best to refrain from arguing back. Hence, he decided to simply downplay the issue with a courteous smile.

The whole thing apparently started after Un Izoey woke up and proposed to Fear and Kuroe who were in charge of surveillance: "I want to thank you two, right, people have praised my technique before." Feeling curious, Kuroe was the first to accept her massage. Then seeing that it looked quite comfortable, Fear also followed. At that moment, Haruaki had arrived to call them for breakfast. Swayed by the "trying it out a little won't hurt" kind of atmosphere, he was dragged into it. Speaking of "no sense of wariness whatsoever," perhaps that was completely right.

In any case, the subject finally ended, signaled by a great sigh from Konoha. Breathing a sigh of relief, Haruaki looked over at Un Izoey who was sitting at the dining table.

She was no longer wearing pajamas and was dressed in an unbuttoned, navel-baring lab coat with the tribal, high-slit skirt. Her usual attire.

"My greeting: I say good morning. I report the report that my body is completely recovered."

Un Izoey lowered her head and bowed. Fear snorted.

"That's really great... As if I'd actually say that. This means you can move around freely now? Looks like troublesome things will continue."

Un Izoey gazed at Fear for a long while. What, you wanna fight? Fear frowned. Then Un Izoey turned her gaze away from Fear and towards Kirika again. Then she looked at Konoha, Kuroe and Haruaki in turn.

"Before breakfast, I have a suggestion."

"Suggestion?"

Un Izoey nodded and answered in the affirmative.

"My hope: I hope to leave this home."

Hearing her sudden proposal, everyone looked at one another silently.

"If you want a reason, I tell you the reason is last night's incident. The Draconians' target is me. Staying here brings unnecessary tension. My true feelings: thank you all for the treatment and protection. Therefore this."

Her Japanese was still quite strange and difficult to understand... But basically: she's the one being targeted, she's thankful for our care, and she'll leave this place to avoid causing trouble for us, something like that?

"No wait. Aren't you planning on handing the letter to the superintendent? If you leave, what about communicating—"

"My idea: no problem. Wait outside school every day."

"Even if you say you'll wait at school... It's still unknown when he'll return. By the way, once you leave, do you have somewhere to stay?"

"This country has many shelter facilities. I have some travel money. My request: I demand wallet returned."

Oh dear? Haruaki looked at Konoha but she shook her head in surprise.

"Uh, well... Although I've confiscated stuff like the knife, I never saw a wallet in the first place."

That was what Haruaki expected. He did not recall seeing anything like that either. Hence—

"It probably fell and got lost while you were fighting. Your battle started out quite intensely, right?"

Kuroe probably guessed correctly. Everything had started with Fear pointing out "Santa Claus is flying past." Given that the fight had taken place while they were jumping between the tops of buildings, it was a likely possibility.

Most likely sensing through the mood that they were not lying, Un Izoey remained frozen and expressionless for quite a while. But then after that—

"...Got it. My idea: I declare I have no more problems. Warriors sometimes go on hunts for many days. I am used to living in the wild."

"No, that's a huge problem... If you don't have money, then how are you going to eat?"

"My idea: I repeat my words of no problems. This is because..."

The posture of her back remained completely straight.

Going as far as to exhibit a tone of pride, she declared with confidence:

"—My judgment: the peeseh in this country lack wildness. Slow in movements, very easy to catch."

"Hey! I don't quite get what you're saying, but it feels like I heard something dangerous sounding!"

"No, I don't get what you're saying. Dangerous where? Taste very good after roasting."

"Exactly that! That's the dangerous part!"

Un Izoey stared with her head tilted. Were cultural gaps really that difficult to bridge?

"A-Anyway, let's get back to the main topic. First of all, this is what I think... I can't cast a penniless person out onto the streets, so I vote that you stay."

"I vote the same. If someone discovers weird corpses of stray dogs and it gets on the news, it'll be troublesome."

"My correction: I explain that peeseh are not izucru. I remember now. In your language, they are called mi—"

"I-I don't wanna hear it, okay—!"

Haruaki drove that word out of his ears while giving Konoha multiple looks. She sighed while sipping her tea.

"I don't want to repeat the same words over and over again... Hoo~ Think of it as giving up. I cast a neutral vote."

"I side with Konoha-kun and vote neutral as well. Although my true feelings would rather see this girl out of this place as soon as possible, since I'm not a member of this home, my position does not allow me to vote against, right?"

This meant two votes for and two votes neutral. In a majority vote, this would probably be enough to reach a conclusion. However, it was still necessary to hear what Fear had to say. As Haruaki turned his gaze towards her, Fear spoke with a scowl:

"Hmph... I neither agree nor disagree. I don't care what you're going to eat. When the superintendent returns, we'll still be visiting the school once we're notified. You can wait there for all I care—That's what I'd really like to say. However, unrelated to your condition, I must refuse your suggestion due to my own reasons. At least for today, you still have to stay here."

"Why? I ask this question."

"After what happened last night, it's clear that you're still their target. Since that swordswoman's comrades fled with their tails between their legs without succeeding in their attack on you, she's probably gonna appear in person next. So, you have to act as bait to draw out the 'Santa Hunter' again... Although I've no idea why she's stealing Santa costumes, as long as this remains unresolved, I can't help but feel weighted down and unable to enjoy Christmas. So if possible, I hope the enemy will show up before night falls."

"I ask another question. If today is peaceful all day, what do you do?"

Hmm? Fear crossed her arms and tilted her head. Haruaki also pondered the same question. As indicated by the moniker, the 'Santa Hunter' was a thief who stole Santa costumes. But Santa costumes were not available all year round. Once the Christmas season was over, these costumes would no longer be in sight. Then what—?

"In that case, once Christmas is over, the hunter's targets will also be gone. If the enemy doesn't show up today or tomorrow, how will things develop in the future... Muumuu, no idea."

"I'm still quite concerned with how quickly they fled. Indeed, it's possible that the 'Santa Hunter' might make a personal appearance next time... But conversely, it's also possible that they don't visit again."

After Kirika said that, Fear looked up at the ceiling. Inexplicably disheartened, she murmured softly:

"Perhaps it'd be nice to think that no more crimes will be committed once Christmas is over... But watching the culprit escape right before my eyes is the absolute worst feeling. I really wanted a definitive end. Also... Oh right, I almost forgot because it's so meaningless, worthless and insignificant, but I do have another bait—the 'cube' that they seem quite eager to retrieve. Even if Christmas passes, as long as it's unclear whether they've given up on this thing, we still need to stay on guard in case they attack in the days ahead."

Fear reached one hand into her pocket. Most likely, instead of the Rubik's cube, she was gripping the other cube.

Haruaki felt there was something wrong with Fear's attitude. The unease regarding Aiko was stirring subtly and restlessly in his heart again. But suppressing it, Haruaki thought: She's right, because they totally did not wish to use a cursed tool, because Aiko was not dead, hence, the cube

was completely useless. Be that as it may—Fear currently seemed to be trying to convince herself with these words, to an excessive degree beyond necessary.

Sure enough, this was related to what she involuntarily asked the night before? If he were the one holding on to that cube—Haruaki wondered. Just as he was thinking this morning, Fear was going through the same. Perhaps he would have ended up asking the same question then suffered a serious blow for having asked it. Hence, Haruaki thought, the reason really stemmed from her concerns over what happened last night—But then again, that did not seem to be all.

"...Hey, Haruaki, are you listening?"

Fear turned her gaze towards him. Haruaki hastily brought his thoughts back to the present. Although he was quite concerned with Fear's attitude, it was currently imperative to figure out a plan going forward.

"Yeah... True. Even if Christmas passes, we still have other holidays and festivals ahead like New Year's. If possible, I really hope we can get this resolved as early as possible, but how..."

At this moment, Kuroe's cellphone suddenly rang. "Oh, excuse me." Apologizing, she interrupted the usual Demon King deathcry ringtone that was going "Never forget, I shall reincarnate endlessly to return...!" and picked up the call. She started out listening quietly with frequent nods—But after a while, she held her hand over the receiver and looked at everyone with a slightly troubled expression.

"Uh~ The cake shopkeeper's wife has apparently fallen ill with a cold. But tonight's Christmas Eve happens to be the most profitable opportunity that only comes once a year. Although he has heard that Ficchi and Kono-san are tied up, he really hopes that you two could help out by working part-time... Basically that. Also, the more people the better, something about it'd be nice to get other girls as well. That's what the shopkeeper begged me tearfully."

They had already declined once using the reason of "an unavoidable situation." But for the cake shopkeeper to make a request in spite of that—He really must be in quite a crisis? Although Kuroe was already set to take their place for today as well, with the shopkeeper's wife fallen ill, the shop really must be extremely understaffed, right?

"Working huh... If possible, I'd like to help of course, but currently, it's really... Sigh..."

After Fear remarked, Un Izoey tilted her head slightly and asked:

"Working is what? I ask this question."

"Basically a job where you earn money. Selling cakes while wearing Santa outfits. It's pointless to say it at this point, but it's your fault. In fact, we were originally supposed to go work today as well, but it's not like we can let you stay at home and do whatever you want!"

Un Izoey fell into deep thought. Somehow, Haruaki had an ominous feeling.

Then—a dark-skinned hand was raised.

"I have suggestion."

"Suggestion?"

"Yes, my thought: answer to stalemate. Since my staying home prevents you all from working, then problem solved if I go as well."

"Huh...?"

These words came way too suddenly, right? Faced with Haruaki's group staring wide-eyed, Un Izoey continued seriously:

"From what I heard, solving the problem requires meeting the Draconians. The Draconians' actual goal is still unknown but from their actions so far, they are quite obsessed with me, red clothes including Santa suits, the 'cube' in your hand, these three—No doubt."

"Hmm... That's true."

"Then bringing these three things together, the Draconians' chance of approaching us again might be higher? In other words—achieved if I wear red Santa suit and work together with person holding 'cube.'"

"..."

"I think just massage is not enough to thank protection and shelter, so I suggest this. Proud warrior must repay favors. My wish, please consider."

Haruaki's group looked at one another. The first to speak her mind was Fear.

"It pisses me off that the idea came from this girl, but it's true that we have no idea whether we'll encounter the Draconians again if we keep staying at home. Perhaps any plan should be tried out before judging it. As long as we stay vigilant while we're working, we should be able to prevent other people's clothes from getting stolen."

"Although I've no idea how much of a patrolling effect we'll make by walking in the street—It's better than doing nothing at all, probably. If the enemy finds us a nuisance, they might make another appearance for the sake of eliminating us. Although I don't believe the other side will launch an attack amidst the crowd... Perhaps this would be a so-called baiting strategy deep in enemy territory?"

"How troubling, but the more people helping the better... yes? I don't intend on wearing a Santa outfit, but given the pressing circumstances, I have no choice but to help."

"In that case, I'm sure the cake shopkeeper will be quite relieved. Is this okay with you, Class Rep?"

Kirika shrugged and said:

"The cake shopkeeper has no one else to turn to, right? Since rumors of the 'Santa Hunter' are circulating, I don't think part-timers are that easy to find—If we don't go, the shopkeeper might be forced to offer compensation above the minimum wage mandated by law so as to hire replacement part-timers. However, we can't let him do that either because we can't allow innocent ordinary part-timers to become new victims."

Despite her reluctance, Kirika also seemed to have decided to help work part-time as well.

"My true feelings: grateful for chance to repay favor. I will work hard."

Un Izoey nodded with satisfaction. After a quick survey of the conference scene where a conclusion had been reached, Kuroe pressed her phone to her ear again and spoke:

"Hello? Thanks to my vigorous persuasion, I've convinced everyone to agree and come on board~ In addition, I've pulled in two fresh recruits..."

So, as a reward for my efforts, will I be getting a slight raise in hourly wage?"

Part 3

Encapsulated in a single sentence—

Over there was a dark-skinned Santa girl with her bellybutton exposed.

"My advertising: I assert that this offering called cake is needed for this holy Christmas Eve. I express to the strong fathers and gentle mothers, to not let little children go hungry during the feasts for deepening blood kin's bonds, you should act like you discovered a sleeping hare, buy this cake greedily without hesitation. I suggest this suggestion."

Gazing with her eyes as usual without the slightest emotional fluctuation, yet with her back perfectly straight, Un Izoey delivered this speech with complete seriousness. Naturally, she attracted a lot of attention.

A Santa hat was perched lightly on top of her gray hair. Beneath the super miniskirt she had chosen "because it is easy for movement, I pick this," her pair of dark-skinned legs were exposed in full view. Similarly, she had chosen a front-buttoned top for her Santa outfit. As usual, in accordance to the customs of her tribe, she only fastened the middle button, resulting in an exposed navel despite the chilly weather as well as a bulge that was covered precariously. Truly, there was an unguarded impression that would pose as a bad influence for children.

"Muuuu... I absolutely can't lose to that country girl! Cake! Very tasty! Buy it now!"

"Why are you using imperatives? Your basic customer service attitude is wrong!"

"Yes. Two of this type of cake... Thank you for your business. Haru, this customer would like to pay~"

Of course, Fear and the others were all wearing Santa outfits. Raising their voices to attract customers, their enthusiasm brought pedestrians to stop by one after another, resulting in more hectic work—From a business point of view, this was naturally an endless cycle worthy of celebrating.

"Man, woah, this is getting too busy...!"

"I report: buy-sell contract established. I judge this customer to be like an excellent hunter who doesn't let prey escape."

"Yachi, leave the bagging to me. You should focus on the cash register."

"Thanks, Class Rep!"

Like Haruaki, Kirika was also wearing the cake shop's apron. She glanced at the surrounding scene.

"However... Despite the recession, this booming business is quite astounding. Completely beyond my expectations."

"The normal crowds should be much smaller. Or rather, nothing less expected from Christmas Eve, I guess~?"

Finishing with the cash register, Haruaki looked up. The crowds appearing in the shopping street at dusk were unprecedented. As though to receive this incoming tide of people, the shops themselves were fully decorated more splendorously than before. Green and silver tinsel wrapped densely, pictures of Santa Claus drawn on display windows, miniature Christmas trees arranged in front of stores the way that Japanese set up decorated pine trees at their doors for the New Year—



"I wouldn't be surprised if someone pointed out that this is the only district where crowds increased. Disregarding that girl, it's because Fear-kun and the others look so cute and attractive in their Santa outfits."

Watching Fear and the others working energetically, Kirika relaxed her expression slightly wryly.

"How should I say this? I think you'll look good in a costume too, Class Rep. Of course, the excessively revealing type like Konoha's would be no good."

"What! A-Absolutely ridiculous! That's not what I meant...!"

Kirika suddenly went red in the face and protested vehemently. It's just a very normal thought—Haruaki replied with a wry expression. As a side note, Fear and the girls' outfits were all provided by the laundry shopkeeper in the shopping street. The outfit for Un Izoey, who had joined in suddenly for the part-time work, was borrowed additionally with much difficulty, but getting more Santa outfits was probably impossible.

(Perhaps we really stretched the favor. Next time, I'd better thank the laundry shopkeeper properly.)

While Haruaki was thinking over this matter, the young shopkeeper of the laundry shop happened to make a visit with a paper bag with him.

"Hi everyone, you're working hard."

"Oh, hello... I'm really sorry about our unreasonable request just now. You've really been a great help to us."

"No problem, it's wonderful to see cute girls wearing cute clothes. This is a universal truth! Ahhh, to think such adorable Santa girls existed... What a sight for sore eyes...!"

The young shopkeeper watched Fear and the girls in fascination. Perhaps noticing Kirika's half-narrowed eyes which seemed to be accusing him of looking so perverted, he hastily corrected his demeanor and said:

"Oh by the way, you two have great chemistry going there. Like right now, wearing the same kind of apron, you really seem like a young married couple."

"Y-Young married c-couple...?"

Bang—As though a bullet had pierced her heart, Kirika's body suddenly shook. "A-A-A-A-Absolutely ridiculous. S-Seriously, absolutely ridiculous... U-Ufufu... Fufufu..." She murmured emphatically while turning away, her entire body shaking intensely. Haruaki could not really understand since her face was not in view, but it felt like she was probably suppressing her emotions because someone said something excessively strange but she could not complain outright despite her agitation. That was definitely it.

"P-Please don't make that kind of strange comment."

"Ahaha, sorry my bad. Well then, I guess the young married couple illusion will be shattered next... Basically. Here you go."

Saying that, the young shopkeeper handed over the paper bag in his hand. What was it?

"Because it'd be such as shame if cute girls were present without enough clothing for them to dress up, I made an emergency request to a fellow aficionado of cosplay photography... Cough cough! Rather, I gathered some clothes through a friend. A total of three sets."

"Are these actually additional Santa outfits...? But why three?"

"Eh, what about those two girls? The ones who came to help out with the Dan-no-ura's reopening... That girl in the maid outfit and the extremely pretty girl. I was thinking they'd definitely be coming too."

"No, not this time unfortunately..."

Essentially, Haruaki tried calling them. "Oh~ You don't have enough people huh. So? To me who has already scheduled 'the perfect Christmas for two,' planned three weeks in advance, what do you intend to propose, human?" After hearing these extremely cold words, he was left with no choice. Had he forced her to come, she would probably have appeared with a kitchen cleaver in one hand.

"I see~ Of course a pretty girl would be the best foundation, but the maid is the classic of cosplay... Correction, I was thinking you'd understand the philosophy that girls should wear cute clothes. Yeah, in that case, it can't be helped. Perhaps there's a surplus, but please make good use of it."

Saying that on his own, the young shopkeeper left with brisk footsteps. Upon leaving, he did not forget to call out to Fear and the others: "How

about a picture to commemorate? Okay, thanks~!" Then he snapped a photo.

Kirika scowled as she stared at the paper bag in Haruaki's hand. Then her eyes glanced up at Haruaki's face—

"Do you really... think... it'd suit me...?"

"Eh? O-Oh, of course!"

"R-Really—No! Whether it suits me or not, it's irrelevant. How absolutely ridiculous. I simply... Indeed, I think that I should help if I'm able to help Fear-kun and the others who look like they are the busiest. After all, I can simply return to my post and handle miscellaneous chores whenever you're overwhelmed at the cash register, so..."

"..."

"What is with those eyes of yours!? Listen carefully, this is assuming there's actually a Santa outfit I'm able to wear! Give me that! Seriously... Absolutely ridiculous...!"

For some reason, Kirika was in a great huff as she snatched the paper bag from Haruaki's hand.

Several minutes later, the number of Santa girls increased by one again.

Just as the sun was just about to set, the group decided to take a break. Today, the the cake shopkeeper was apparently too occupied to prepare refreshments, so Haruaki went over to a convenience store and bought some juice and simple snacks. Sitting inside the heated interior of the shop, they rested.

"Phew~ ...So tired. But we're not even half done yet. That energy source I need for recovering my vigor, you must have bought it, of course! If you dare say you forgot, I'll curse you viciously!"

"Yeah yeah, if you're talking about rice crackers, I bought them. The shopkeeper paid for these, so thank him properly afterwards."

"Speaking of thanks, I never expected him to grab our hands while thanking us with tears streaming down his face. The situation must have been really dire."

"Yeah, but nothing is too difficult so long as we of the beautiful Santa quintet are mobilized. Kiririn joining us in the middle really helped out a lot~"

"I-Is that so? I simply felt that it'd be a shame if the laundry shopkeeper brought these Santa outfits expressly and no one wore them... As manpower, I'm just filling in temporarily."

Kirika pressed her skirt down firmly in embarrassment. Who knew if it were good fortune or not, but inside the bag brought by the laundry shopkeeper were rather standard Santa outfits. In terms of liveliness and eye candy, it was honestly inferior to Fear and Konoha's, but with respect to contributing to sales, Haruaki believed that the different was not that great. The awkward Santa girl's embarrassed aura must have been quite a refreshing sight, attracting many gazes to Kirika's agitated state.

However, speaking of gathering attention, one could not forget one particular girl. Haruaki walked over to Un Izoey who was spacing out while sitting on a chair in the corner and said to her:

"You... Yes, you've been working hard too. Here, have a meat bun."

"My question: I ask the question what is meat bun?"

"Ah~ ...Anyway, you'll know once you have a taste. It's delicious."

Here—The instant when Haruaki handed over the meat bun bought from the convenience store to Un Izoey, her two hands trembled as she gasped.

"This..."

"Oh, I forgot to mention! Careful, it's still quite hot—"

"—So round. This circular round shape is perfect circle!"

"That's why you're astounded!?"

To think Haruaki was worried for her. What exactly was she gasping about?

Hmm, indeed, she had mentioned before that circular things were always tasty things. Haruaki did not bother remarking cynically. Un Izoey held the meat bun in her hands like a young child, examining its round shape intently, finally opening her mouth wide to bite down as though she had made a major decision. Remaining still for quite a while—

"This food—I am touched. Tasty. Tasty, this thing is the world's most tastiest."

Munch chew chew, she brought the meat bun in her hands to her mouth in a manner reminiscent of a squirrel. Standing in stark contrast to the extremely serious expression on her face, her behavior seemed quite adorable to watch.

"Hmph... I admit that meat buns are tasty, but the world's most tastiest food is definitely the rice cracker, which happens to be very round too!"

Crunching rice crackers in her mouth, Fear retorted with a snort. Although she instantly pouted with displeasure when Un Izoey argued "that type of incomplete roundness is incomplete," Un Izoey ignored her and focused on eating the meat bun. Clearly, she really enjoyed eating it.

"Hmm, it's great that you like it... You've never had one before?"

"I reply with affirmative affirmation. This is really... Or perhaps most likely, even more tasty than the vurachiha our tribe is only able to eat once every few years."

"What's that? What kind of food is it?"

"A creature very hard to catch. Unknown how to call it in Japanese. As for characteristic, first of all, it has six legs—"

"Uh, hold it right there. I think it's best that I don't hear the rest at this stage. Forget it."

"Affirmative."

Nodding readily, she began chewing again.

"Jeez, it's not like it's food that you can get obsessed about. I guess food in your homeland must be quite hard to come by."

"Your comment cannot be ignored. I reply saying that although the food is not as varied and plentiful as in this country, but there are still many tasty things. For example, take scooniha soaked in alcohol and wrapped in rerri leaves then steamed together with goenutz, the fruit pulp melts over the tongue and the sweetness spreads out inside the entire mouth—"

"M-Muu, I don't understand but the way you describe it really sounds quite delicious. How unbelievable... Since it's sweet, that means it's some kind of dessert? Gulp."

"Rare chance, I want to know more about other food in this country. Any other tasty things?"

"Hmph hmph, are you begging me to tell you? Although I'm not obliged to tell you, very well. The rice cracker goes without saying, but there are many others! Oh right, after coming to this country, immediately after the rice cracker, the next food to move me was curry, also..."

Fear proudly recounted the delicious flavors of food she had tasted before. Un Izoey nodded enthusiastically while listening. Perhaps because she was imagining the taste of the unknown food, her eyes were filled with pure interest. Holding the meat bun with both hands while she ate, she really looked like an innocent child.

Only during this instant did Konoha, Kuroe and even Kirika show no signs of hostility in their eyes. Exasperation. Wry expressions. Smiling. Shrugging. They simply watched this scene silently.

Indeed. Un Izoey belonged to an organization that they could not approve of. Perhaps their standpoints were irreconcilable.

However—Haruaki did not think that implied she was a bad person herself. Without any particular reason, he simply believed so.

If only the girls reached the same conclusion—Haruaki could not help but think that.

"However... The 'Santa Hunter' hasn't shown up yet."

"There was no conclusive evidence that she'd arrive in the first place. Our original intention was simply banking on the possibility that she might be tempted to show up. But still, we cannot afford to be careless. Although I will stay on guard and sense for nearby hostility and killing intent, please remain vigilant and look for signs of suspicious characters."

"I know, if we believe this country girl—the 'Santa Hunter' should be dressed in red, right? I'm not going to miss that kind of Santa imposter. If the enemy attacks us out of an abnormal obsession with red clothing, or makes any other kind of move, very likely, she'll be wearing the same outfit."

After the break, Haruaki's group chattered as they reconfirmed their goal and readied themselves for work once more. Not long after the second half of their shift started, two familiar faces passed by, in front of the cake shop. Zenon and Ganon.

"Oh my... Good evening, Yachi-sama."

"Are you working as part-timers? How nice~ What a great role model to show those horny teenagers who are taking advantage of the Christmas season to make out and get lovey-dovey... Sorry, just kidding. Trying to do serious things like an educator is really the most tiring..."

Approaching them was Zenon, dressed in her usual suit, while Ganon followed behind in a lazy pace as always. Zenon nodded lightly.

"Right. I am very sorry but there is no news from the superintendent so far."

"Oh I see... I understand."

While answering, Haruaki saw, in the corner of his eye, a red and brown figure move swiftly and even take out that notebook from her bosom and perk up her ears conspicuously (although she was probably trying to act as though nothing had happened), approaching Haruaki and Zenon. She still hasn't give up on collecting information about the superintendent?

"Ooh, it's Zenon and Ganon! Perfect timing. Would you like to buy a cake? A cake!"

"Good evening, Fear-sama...!"

The instant she looked back, Zenon froze abruptly. Staring at Fear dressed in the Santa outfit, she widened her eyes, clenched her fist and bit her lip while her shoulders trembled incessantly—

"Perfect timing, yes. Running over to other places would be very tiring, let's buy some cake here... Oh? Hey~ My little sister~... Drats, her switch has already activated."

Ganon waved her hand before Zenon's eyes but finally shrugged and gave up. Zenon forcefully pushed that obstructing palm away, but her gaze remained focused intently on Fear—Finally, she directed her eyes elsewhere, but only towards Konoha, Kuroe, Kirika and Un Izoey who was standing beside her, all of them in their Santa outfits.

Oh yeah. Haruaki would forget sometimes, but it was true that Zenon had a certain liking. As much as she wanted to hide it, she had an extreme liking for cute things.

Haruaki suddenly thought of a suggestion.

"Excuse me~ Zenon-san. Supposing you're willing, would you like to wear a Santa costume? After all, we have two extra... Basically, because of a lack of manpower, the shopkeeper wanted to hire as many people as possible, so if you're free, maybe you could help out... But it's probably a long shot,ahaha."

Indeed, he simply came up with the idea on whim, 99% intended as a joke, really just a joke. That was only natural too. But little did he expect—

Haruaki never expected Zenon to accept readily.

"You all would like some help?"

Zenon's eyes flashed. Haruaki shuddered.

"U-Umm... Zenon... -san...?"

"Since you need help, I won't refuse of course. It is my fault for failing to locate the superintendent's whereabouts. Only because of that, Yachi-sama, your troubles were increased. Compensation must be provided. A secretary is precisely a role responsible for helping others. In order to improve my skills and affirm my prowess, providing assistance now is definitely a beneficial act. May I ask where the changing room might be?"

A rare out-of-control state, this reminded Haruaki of a certain occasion when she dressed Kuroe up as a maid. Immediately, Zenon grabbed from behind the collar of Ganon who was muttering "Eh~ So tired~ Can't we just buy a cake and go home~?" while continuing to gaze sharply at Haruaki.

"By the way... You mentioned just now that there are two extra outfits?"

Ganon exhaled. In her hunchback posture, she resembled a cat that had been lifted by the nape of its neck, unable to offer resistance.

Can't you struggle a little in times like these? Haruaki wondered. But due to Zenon's scary gaze, he did not dare voice his thoughts.

"Receiving 10000 yen from you... Here is your change of 7700 yen. Thank you for your patronage."

Zenon was operating the cash register with superhuman speed and handing change to the customer. Every time she bowed, the fluffy white ball at the end of her Santa hat would bob once. In terms of perfect customer service attitude, she was lacking in smiles, but most likely aware of this fact, she had chosen to work at the cash register just like Haruaki. But perhaps it was motivated by self-interest as well for the post offered a clear view of Fear and the girls at work.

(Hmm~ I could very well be witnessing an extremely rare scene...)

Dragged forcibly by Zenon into this situation, Ganon was dressed in a Santa outfit as well, a sight impossible to imagine given her usual white coat attire. However, she was simply wearing it without doing any work. Further back, behind Haruaki's group, she was currently sitting on a chair in a corner of the tent, collapsed in a lazy mass. Her appearance, even sloppier than usual, was readily explained, namely—

"...Pwah~ Oh, hmm, drinking outdoors is quite nice once in a while~"

"Hey~ Nee-chan, you really hold your liquor quite well! Here's another cup, have another cup!"

"Ahmm~? Don't say something so tiring... Even if it's two or three cups, bring it on! Huhahaha~!"

Her spot had transformed into the location of a mini-party. Gathered around Ganon were several shopkeepers from the shopping street. Among the refreshments delivered by the bar owner, the true culprit was the beer that was somehow mixed inside the pile together with other drinks.

A drunk Santa together with several red-faced shopkeepers. Although this combination was on a different level compared to Un Izoey, neither was it an appropriate scene for children to witness. Perhaps due to the hearty laughter and the cheering during toasts, the joyful atmosphere was spreading to the nearby crowds. This succeeded in drawing customers as well, perhaps.

At this moment, a young girl, who was walking with her mother, tripped and fell near the tent. Apparently suffering a scrape on her knee, she began to cry loudly. In the middle of drinking heartily, Ganon looked up.

"Oh, please don't cry here, it's very tiring... Hey look, little lady, Santa is going show you something nice~"

Ganon stumbled her way over with a beer can in one hand and crouched down, meeting gazes with the girl. Then after rummaging in her chest pocket for a while, she took out a band-aid and applied it to the girl's knee in a highly experienced manner.

"Okay. The only thing left is a little magic spell. Nunu, pain pain go away... Ah~ It's getting tiring so lemme omit the rest of the incantation, Abracadabra~ Hmm, how does it feel now?"

Ganon hovered her hand over the knee as she spoke casually. The girl looked up with an amazed expression:

"It doesn't hurt now! Thank you, old—"

"Miss."

"...Miss, your magic is amazing!"

Quick on the uptake, the young child instantly corrected herself and jumped up. Ganon smiled in response:

"There's nothing that Santa can't do. Please be more careful when walking from now on~"

The girl ran back to her mother's side. The mother bowed her head to express her thanks to Ganon, then turned and departed—That was what Haruaki expected, but along the way, she turned back and returned to buy a cake. A most memorable first customer brought in by Ganon.

Seemingly oblivious to this accomplishment, Ganon returned to the mini-party as Haruaki watched. Then he surveyed the scene before him again.

Fear was busy, Konoha's outfit was dangerously revealing, Kuroe was cute and petite. Even Kirika, whose school uniform look constituted a major part of her image, was dressed in a Santa costume. Strangely enough, Un Izoey was also working with everyone else. Furthermore, there was Zenon who was playing the role of a capable Santa instead of a capable secretary, as well as Ganon the drunk Santa—

A scene that was definitely impossible normally. Nevertheless, right now, it was taking place here without a doubt. Haruaki felt a strange floating

feeling in his heart. The only thing he could be certain of was that it was not a bad feeling. An unbelievable sense of raised spirits.

Surely, this must be a scene that was only permitted on a special occasion like Christmas Eve.

He recalled what Fear had said once, Christmas was not just the day when Santa delivered presents—It was also the day of miracles when wishes could come true.

(What I wish for huh... There's so many things. However, it does feel nice. Being able to think that counts as a sort of wish, right?)

He pondered in a trance. However, perhaps because he was always thinking of these topics, other people remarked that he was elderly or boring in mindset. Haruaki secretly grimaced in his mind.

Then he thought, what was everyone wishing for?

Fear, Konoha, Kuroe, Kirika, Zenon, Ganon and Un Izoey?

—As well as the unencountered enemy?

What did everyone actually wish for?

Part 4

After the sun had set and the part-time job was about to end, another chaotic scene arrived for who knows how many times now. Every time Fear and the girls raised their voices to tout, customers kept increasing, gradually overwhelming the cash register with work. Since they currently took turns resting with one person on break at a time, it just so happened that Haruaki's capable assistant, Zenon, was away. Although Haruaki could wait for her to return, he decided to make use of the only person on the scene who appeared to be quite free.

"E-Excuse me, Ganon-san, could you go call Zenon-san to come back? It's almost about time!"

"Eh~ That's so tiring~ But if I continue to stay here, I might be forced to help out, which would be even more tiring~ Can't be helped, I'll go call her~"

The party had already drawn to a close. Haruaki did not know if it was the alcohol or her natural gait as he watched Ganon stumble on her way. Then

he turned back to his work at the cash register. He could not help but feel a little resentment towards Fear and the girls who kept bringing in new customers without any consideration for his situation. However, he could only grit his teeth and work furiously. Since Zenon had not returned yet, all he could do was try his best...!

For the next long while, Haruaki applied himself to his work in total absorption. Then he suddenly discovered that the long lineup had disappeared completely. Grinning from ear to ear, the cake shopkeeper came outside.

"Hi everyone, thank you for your hard work! Thanks to you all, we're all sold out!"

"I-It's over...?"

"Yeah, all the ingredients purchased for today have already been used up, so there's no way to replenish the cakes. It's over! I knew it, asking you guys for help was the right decision!"

The shopkeeper patted Haruaki's shoulder as he spoke. Compared to the man who was almost about to cry back when they first started working, worrying that the shop was facing a survival crisis on the verge of closing down, he was like a completely different person.

"It's over? Although it's a bit unsatisfactory that the 'Santa Hunter' ended up not making an appearance... We'll think more about it later. Let's enjoy the delight of a successfully finished job."

Fear wiped sweat off her brow and spoke with relief. All the other members of the group drew near. Hearing that the cakes were sold out, everyone showed a sense of accomplishment on their face—Except Un Izoey who nodded expressionlessly while going: "I judge this similar to successfully hunted all prey in a forest."

"It's cold outside, right? Leave the cleanup to me. You guys should all go inside. I'm going to raise your wages so wait while I fetch the money. Oh, I also reserved your share of cake of course, please look forward to it!"

"Ohoh! Another chance to eat that strawberry again? ...If I could eat it together with rice crackers, that would be fantastic like a dream!"

"That combination sounds very strange, Fear, then let's go inside..."

Just as the group was about to move—

"Hello everyone. May I have a moment of your time?"

A man in a coat spoke to them. The shopkeeper put up a radiant business-like smile and said:

"Oh, dear customer, I'm really sorry. Our cakes are all sold out already..."

"I'm glad for your booming business, but I'm not here to buy cakes, even though I would like to get one as a gift for family. That said, I'm in a line of work where booming business would be terrible... In other words, this is my profession."

While saying that, the man took out a black leather notebook from his breast pocket—A police notebook.

"Sir, why are you here...? Is it because of the 'Santa Hunter'?"

"Santa Hunter...? Oh, now that you mention it, I've heard of the incident. Well, that's unrelated, at least for now, while the police are investigating it. Anyway, there's a separate matter that started roughly a week ago. We've received reports of missing persons, roughly four of them. That's why I'm asking around the shopping street to see if the populace has any clues or eyewitness accounts."

Missing persons would be a very serious matter but if it started a week ago, then that was even earlier than the 'Santa Hunter' incident and unrelated to them—That thought crossed everyone's mind, but—

The detective took out several photos. His next words sent a chill down Haruaki's spine.

"Oh right, by the way, they all shared a common feature—reportedly, they were all wearing red clothes before going missing. I think that this clothing characteristic is quite conspicuous, so if you have any clues, even trivial facts, please tell me."

Haruaki thought it was a miracle that the detective did not sense his surprised reaction. Haruaki's group exchanged glances with one another and pretended as appropriate to put away the tables.

The shopkeeper shook his head after looking at the photos. Saying "thank you for your cooperation," the detective simply put the photos away. His current task was probably just interviewing the shops one by one. The detective turned around, meanwhile glancing at Fear and Un Izoey, then disappeared into the crowd. Suspicious foreigners couldn't possibly be

working openly, dressed up as Santa—This was probably the thought that saved them miraculously.

Following the earlier instructions of the shopkeeper, Haruaki's group entered the shop. Naturally, they instantly exchanged glances with grave expressions and whispered discreetly:

"What does everyone think?"

"Missing persons dressed in red... Then immediately afterwards, the 'Santa Hunter' started stealing clothes... I think there's a connection between them, although it's unclear why the crime severity went down."

"Assuming the same culprit is behind everything, the situation is very serious. Although it'll be fewer than today, there should be at least one or two Santas on the streets even tomorrow. Next time, someone could go missing rather than simply losing their clothes. Since we don't know why the culprit chose to reduce the crime severity, it could very well step up again for unknown reasons."

"I knew that the 'Santa Hunter' is an unforgivable villain! Now is not the time for saying stuff like 'once the Christmas season is over, she might not commit more crimes'! Since people have gone missing already, then the only one who knows where they are is the 'Santa Hunter'—We must catch her and force her to cough it out!"

"Yeah, but how are we going to do it? She didn't appear today either. Even if we do the same thing tomorrow, there might not be any effect. We may have to think up another plan..."

The group discussed among themselves with serious expressions. In any case, they went into the backyard and suddenly realized—

"Say, wait a minute. Let's change the subject, where are Zenon-san and Ganon-san?"

"I saw them both entering the shop... But they're not here."

Tea and water were already prepared but there were no signs of the two of them.

"No one saw them leave, right? Then where have they run off to...? Ah, this backdoor leads outside, right?"

"That alley has a vending machine, so they probably went there. That, or they could have gone to the convenience store."

"No matter what, they shouldn't have gone far. Also, they're both dressed so conspicuously, right...?"

At this moment, Fear's face suddenly changed drastically. Haruaki also realized the danger involved.

"Not good... They ran off somewhere directly without changing out of their red Santa outfits? If only their clothes were stolen, that's fine, but we just found out that there were even cases of people gone missing...!"

"M-Maybe we're overthinking things... But it does feel quite scary. Let's hurry and find them!"

No one answered.

The group simply exchanged glances with one another and nodded, then rushed out the backdoor, still without saying a word.

—In a nearby alley, Ganon and Zenon's figures were soon located.

However, they were not alone. Furthermore, they were no longer dressed in Santa outfits either.

Because, judging from the result—

A third person was present, a person on the scene who resembled Santa Claus the most.

"Wha...!"

Dumbfounding. What they saw in the deserted alley was a girl dressed in bright red.

She was crouching on the ground...

Forcibly stripping the Santa outfits from the two people lying at her feet.

"Hmm? Oh, you guys have arrived."

The girl turned her head and looked back, swaying her long blonde hair as she stood up. In accordance with this motion, a Santa outfit's sleeve was pulled off Ganon's originally raised arm that now fell to the floor as though it belonged to a doll.



Un Izoey's body shook as she glared viciously at the girl in red and said:

"—My report: I give the reminder that this is the person who first attacked me."

"I know without needing you to tell me! You there, you're from the Draconians, right!? In other words—you're the 'Santa Hunter,' aren't you!?"

Fear took out the Rubik's cube and yelled angrily.

"Kaha! What's a 'Santa Hunter'? Although I still get what you're saying, I don't want to be called by that kind of weird name. I am Kokoro Pentangeli... The Draconians' «Jaws»! You guys probably don't get it, right? Then I'll explain simply."

The girl's shoulders shook as she laughed with amusement. Then with great confidence, she puffed out her chest.

"The Draconians are ranked by their strength. Only a select number of the top-ranked receive crests, the Wounds corresponding to a dragon's 'body parts'—I am one such member. «Blaze» No.4. By the way, your previous opponents, Satsuko and Fourteen, were ranked seventh. No wait, they're ranked nine now? Yes, in other words, what I'm trying to express here... You guys should understand now, right?"

Grinning widely, she continued:

"I am the fourth strongest of the Draconians, far stronger than Satsuko and Fourteen. So, if you don't bring out your true strength—You guys will die."

Chapter 4 - He Comes and Goes Elusively / "When The Liars Go Marchin' In"

Part 1

In contrast to her arrogant and unrefined attitude, the girl was both petite and adorable.

Her blonde hair was sleek and smooth while her facial features were exquisite and elegant. If one were to pose her in a formal dress with a violin in her hand, she would be the very image of a flawless aristocratic lady. Nevertheless, her current attire was not a formal dress.

"Tsk... A girl in red just as rumored. As I thought, you're nothing but a fake Santa."

The girl was wearing a long red scarf. Similarly, she was clad in red clothing from top to bottom. Of course, they were not all the same shade of red but her attire was virtually all red in theme. The skirt and her top gave off an inexplicable impression like a school uniform, serving as a foil to her own adorable appearance, the overall effect seemed a bit like cosplay.

Furthermore, all the things carried on her back were also red. Just as Un Izoey explained in the beginning, she was carrying a sack. Strictly speaking, it was not a sack but more of a makeshift bag created by wrapping a cloth around the contents. But certainly, this bundle truly made her look even more like Santa Claus.

"Anyway, please wait a sec. I went into the effort of stealing them after all. There."

Saying that, she turned her arm behind her and stuffed the Santa costumes she had taken from Zenon and Ganon into the sack.

Although it was incomprehensible why she was stealing Santa outfits, now was not the time to bother with that. The biggest issue concerned the victims who had lost their costumes—lying eyes-closed by her feet, half-naked, Zenon and Ganon.

"Y-You, what did you do to them!? What did you do!?"

"Kaha, ragazzo, there's no need to be impatient. I simply punched them a couple times and they fainted."

"Impatient my ass! Prepare yourself!"

Konoha readied her knife hand while Kirika began to extend the black belt from the sleeve of her Santa outfit.

"We have many questions for you... What is your goal? To defeat Un Izoey? Or Fear? Why did you attack these two? No wait, why are you stealing Santa outfits? Are you also involved with the incident where people wearing red went missing?"

"I have my pressing circumstances too. These matters are all just preparations beforehand, although I've no idea if they might be needed next or not... In any case, it's fine if you don't worry about such things."

As she laughed boldly, Fear stepped towards her warily, gripping the Rubik's cube tight.

"I don't get what you're talking about... But whatever, I'll listen to your circumstances later. 'Santa Hunter,' what you're supposed to do now is not explain but shut up and get ready to be floored!"

"I already said I'm Kokoro, not the 'Santa Hunter.' Oh, maybe it's because of the way I look, people often get it wrong, but I'm not Rococo. I'm half Japanese and Italiano. 'Kokoro' is Japanese for 'heart' which is also cuore in Italian... Kaha, your faces seem to be saying who cares? Very well, I'd like to to start sooner too."

Next, Kokoro reached out towards a strange object that was worn at her waist.

Judging from the object's position and what appeared to be a hilt, it was a scabbard for holding a long sword. However, the scabbard itself was quite unusual. It was quite thick unlike usual sword sheaths. Rather, this had already transcended the issue of thickness, it was virtually a rectangular prism. Looking like a rectangular box, it did not seem like a scabbard suited to carrying by the waist no matter how one looked at it.

This metallic-looking scabbard and the gladiator boots on her feet were the only objects that were excluded from her red theme. Lifting her foot, clad in the boot that looked cold but easy to move about in, she also stepped forward.

Then she drew her sword.

As soon as Konoha saw the sword Kokoro was wielding, she frowned with displeasure.

"Speaking from the standpoint of a sword, I would point out the total lack of aesthetic sense in that thing... Naturally, I don't feel any sense of victory either. Instead, I pity it."

The sword was very unlike a sword.

There were too many decorations on it. Not only the grip and the guard but also halfway up the sword's blade, there were all sorts of inexplicable objects stuck on haphazardly. Screws, metal plates, electronic circuits, swaying tubes. These mechanical accessories created an impression like a messy laboratory. On the other hand, there were also milky-white objects—Are they actually bones? Embedded in the guard was also something resembling a miniature skull. The skull of a monkey, a baby or some other living organism? Haruaki did not dare imagine any further. Decorations exuding an aura of death mixed with ornaments resembling mechanical components in one unified package, giving the sword an extremely bizarre outer appearance. Given its state, this sword definitely could not be contained in anything apart from the cuboid scabbard.

"It's obvious from the appearance already... But there's an ominous aura. A cursed sword?"

"Indeed."

"As a sword, I would only classify it as third rate. To think so many redundant trinkets would be affixed onto the blade."

"In any case, my skills will make up for it, so what does it matter? Well then, let's start. First of all—Let me confirm once more."

Confirm? Confirm what? Before Haruaki could ask these questions, Kokoro had already charged forward, wielding the strange sword in one hand. Her target was—

"...!"

"Kaha, that outfit really suits you!"

Un Izoey's Santa hat fluttered lightly as it fell through the air. Bending down, she extended her dark-skinned leg and performed a move resembling a hooked punch—Kokoro swiftly turned to the side to dodge the attack and aimed her sword at Un Izoey's head.

Supporting herself with one hand on the ground, Un Izoey swung her other leg and kicked towards Kokoro's sword arm. Blocking Kokoro's slash with this attack, she seized the opening to kick again using the leg she first attacked with—But at this moment, her body shook violently and lost balance, falling in an upside-down posture. Her supporting arm suddenly went bent and she fell awkwardly. Frowning, Kokoro made a thrust with her strange sword. Un Izoey kept dodging desperately by rolling on the ground continually.

Haruaki found it quite odd. Since Un Izoey's knife was currently being kept by Konoha, she was fighting unarmed of course. Even so, her movements were far too lacking in agility.

"Tsk... That's all you've really got? I'm so disappointed. What happened to the combat strength capable of rivaling one of the «High Singles» by yourself? In that case, I must complain to those guys in the combat analysis team once I return—"

"Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator», Curse Calling!"

Kokoro turned her body, causing the long scarf to flutter as she blocked the thrust of Fear's giant drill with her strange sword. Kaha, her lips twisted happily.

"Yeah! Excellent vigor! Then let me confirm your power, Fear-in-Cube!"

"You battle maniac! I'm going to make you suffer defeat just like Satsuko!"

"Did you actually hear what I mentioned just now? I am even stronger than Satsuko and Fourteen. O-Oh! Right right, do note that it's fine for you all to rush me all at once. Isn't that how you defeated them with much difficulty?"

Kokoro handled Fear with amusement while chopping with her bizarre-looking sword, severing the «Tragic Black River» and Kuroe's long hair that were extending from dead angles.

"Tsk..."

"She cut them? If she dodged instead, I was planning to rescue Zenon-san and Ganon-san... Looks like it won't be that easy to get our way."

Hearing Kuroe and Kirika's exchange, Haruaki turned to look at Konoha.

"Let's go, Konoha, although I feel sorry for you."

"I understand... Although her movements are on a master's level, she is an enemy with a straightforward fighting style, one we haven't encountered for quite a while—with a clear and definite weapon. No matter how strong she is, everything comes to an end once I deliver a blow of the Sword-Kill Counter to that weapon."

"I'm relying on you."

Konoha's Santa outfit popped open with a poof. In the next instant, held in Haruaki's hand was a Japanese sword in a black scabbard—Konoha's original form. Her Santa hat happened to be still hanging on the tip of the sword. To think we were still busy with Christmas Eve mere moments ago—Haruaki thought as he took off the hat.

"We're up. Please be careful."

"Got it... Fear, we're coming over! Don't push yourself too much!"

With Konoha's assistance, Haruaki found his body much lighter and agile as he rushed towards Kokoro. Within his field of vision, Un Izoey was getting up unsteadily. No problem, just leave everything to me and Konoha and it'll be over instantly—Haruaki said to her in his mind.

In order to perform the «Sword-Kill Counter» to destroy the enemy's weapon in one strike, Konoha's highest-level concentration was needed to see through the opponent's movements and find the perfect "opportunity." In other words, a certain amount of close quarters combat was necessary to discover the enemy's attacking habits. During this time, Konoha's body-controlling powers would decrease, thereby increasing Haruaki's risk—But since Fear was present, she should be able to cover them.

Just as her drill clashed with the sword, Fear glanced towards Haruaki and Konoha.

"Be careful, this girl is very strong!"

"We won't overextend ourselves!"

Saying that, Haruaki rushed into the fray. Just as he was about to swing the Japanese sword towards Kokoro—

"Oh, that thing is..."

Unexpectedly, Kokoro stopped engaging Fear and retreated backwards greatly instead. Seeing her pull back, Konoha displayed alarm and intrigue

while Haruaki halted in his steps. Tapping the weirdly designed sword on her shoulder, Kokoro narrowed one eye as though she were winking.

"The boy and katana combo huh... It's that thing, the special move called the «Sword-Kill Counter», right? As much as I'm curious about what kind of move it is, I'd be in real trouble if this sword were to be broken."

She already knew? Haruaki stared wide-eyed. Rather than surprise, Konoha's voice expressed suspicion more.

"I don't believe I exhibited this move in front of Satsuko and Fourteen..."

"Kaha, this is information obtained through other channels. Indeed, those two are my favorite juniors but the Draconians do have many other members."

"Really? Fine, if you don't want that sword to break, you can also re-sheathe it. That simply changes my slicing target from that sword to your bones. Even if you're unarmed, I shall not show any mercy."

"I can't believe you didn't say you'll kill me, how naive... So be it, I have no intention of fighting unarmed. Neither will I show any mercy."

While saying that, Kokoro turned her face and directed her gaze towards an apparently seldom used vending machine as though thinking: This should do? Nodding slightly, she approached it—

Accompanied by sharp ear-splitting noise, she swung her weird sword and destroyed the vending machine. Instantly, electronic sparks flew while juice cans and coins rolled over to Haruaki's feet.

"W-What are you doing...?"

Kokoro stabbed her sword into the vending machine's remains. It felt like the mechanical ornaments on the sword were making an operating sound while the organic accessories were making groans of pain like the dead. Then—

"...«Ceremony Dedicated to Mary, Inorganic Trial No.4235»!"

While she murmured lightly, the vending machine's remains began to move noisily on their own. The vending machine's original parts and structure were raised by an invisible hand and forcibly reassembled together. This scene of the parts' strange and complex reassembly

somehow felt reminiscent of what was seen during the transformations of Fear's cube.

The inorganic and mechanical parts were gathered to form a giant sword—slender with an acute tip and sharp components lined up in a row; its lower half consisted of a thick grip for easy wielding and a guard to prevent the hand from sliding from the grip to the blade.

No less bizarre than her original sword, this giant sword exhibited a sense of chaos and deformity and seemed large enough to chop a horse in half with a single swing. Simply judging from the saw-toothed blade formed from the forced assembly of components, it was not particularly sharp but the mass exhibited by this steel-colored weapon seemed fully sufficient to overcome this shortcoming.

Kokoro returned her original sword to the rectangular scabbard and used both hands to grip the giant sword made from the vending machine remains.

"Basically like this. Okay, let's try it out. We still haven't fought enough for me to judge you guys' strength."

"Is that a curse's power? I don't quite get it but you'll surely regret later that you didn't run away sooner!"

"Fear-san, you're underestimating the enemy too much... Seriously enough, it can't be helped. We're up too!"

"U-Understood!"

Haruaki and Fear rushed towards the enemy together, closing in on Kokoro who was wielding the giant wreckage sword. Seizing the opportunity when the drill clashed violently with the wreckage sword, the Japanese sword made a forward thrust. However, Kokoro withdrew the wreckage sword with high speed incommensurate with its large appearance and blocked the attack. To be able to swing this thing effortlessly, how much arm strength did she actually possess? Slicing through Kirika's extending belt and severing Kuroe's spears of long black hair, Kokoro proceeded to unleash a series of attacks towards Haruaki like a hurricane. This interplay of offense and defense persisted for quite a while—

"Oh dear... Another one... This kind of sword, completely lacking in aesthetic sense! Haruaki-kun, are you okay?"

"I-I don't think now is the time for holding back... Yeah...!"

"Rightly said. Well then—"

Kokoro made a thrust, but Konoha had already seen the warning signs. Having discerned the weapon's "heart," Konoha's true blade was instantly drawn from the black scabbard held in Haruaki's hand, unleashed with the intent of eschewing murder—

"«Sword-Kill Counter»!"

"Woah!?"

Although it was unknown what principles were used to assemble the wreckage sword, so long as it possessed a weapon's shape, a "critical point" must be present. Konoha's blade destroyed that point with unerring precision. This destructive force was transmitted throughout the wreckage sword. The makeshift greatsword, created from a vending machine's parts, scattered into hundreds of parts once more, collapsing in utter disarray.

Fear did not lose this opportunity and swiftly advanced from Haruaki's side, closing in on the enemy.

"Cow Tits, tell me beforehand if you're doing that...! Can't be helped, here I go! I'll be nice and not aim for your vitals, but don't move recklessly unless you want to get heavily injured!"

Without time to transform into a more merciful torture tool, Fear simply thrust the drill forward directly.

Then just as expected—No, completely beyond expectation.

The drill pierced Kokoro's body, skewering her thigh.

"Wow... It really breaks with a single hit. I see, what an amazing move. How truly impressive... In order to praise you, I'll be nice and move recklessly just for your sake."

"M-Moron. W-What are you doing...?"

Fear's groan was only reasonable, because Kokoro actually took a step forward towards the drill. In other words, the drill pierced far deeper than Fear originally planned—

Despite the furrow on Kokoro's brow, she was still smiling. Trembling all over, Fear pulled the drill out. There must a huge hole in the pierced thigh

now, right? A natural shade of crimson was newly produced from beneath the hem of Kokoro's skirt, escaping towards the ground as it flowed along her leg.

"Hmm...? What, you're not going to press the advantage? Tsk, I'm getting a very boring sense of deja vu here..."

Now was not the time to be saying that, right? Haruaki thought. What on earth was she thinking? If the bleeding was not stopped soon, it would be dangerous, right? Or had she given up already—

Impossible.

But the time Haruaki suddenly noticed, a dramatic change had already occurred in Kokoro's appearance. A completely incomprehensible and bizarre phenomenon that mainly caused all the girls present to frown.

Kokoro's skirt had disappeared"W-When did you take it off? Are you an exhibitionist!? Ugh, that blood is in full view, I really don't want to look at it...!"

"Hey, shameless brat, stop staring so intently! Hurry and close your eyes!"

"As much as I'd like to do that, no can do, right!? Because..."

Something was not right. Kokoro definitely had not performed any action to remove her skirt. It had simply disappeared into thin air.

She only used her hand to press the skirt's fabric against the wound on her thigh.

A twisted grin on her face, Kokoro even used her palm to stroke her exposed thigh, in other words, the spot where the torture tool had pierced. The gushing blood was wiped away as the red surface spread out, then smooth skin appeared underneath. The wound Fear had created was no longer visible on her leg.

"W-What...?"

Hearing Haruaki's soft muttering, Kokoro made no effort to hide her exposed panties and straightened her back.

"Kaha, you must be shocked by this eye candy service, ragazzo! Well, don't mind something so trivial! Because that's exactly what this «Bloodstained Reginetta» is about."

Kokoro was pulling her own sleeve while speaking. In response, Kirika frowned:

"Is that a Wathe as well...? Cursed clothing. Also... a wound-healing curse...?"

"Risposta esatto. I know that you are wearing something similar as well? Although its immortality function is inferior to yours, this is still quite a good item. It was originally a dress but was re-sewn into this form—Hmm, something more like a 'cursed cloth' now. Once upon a time, a woman began to wear that dress all the time after being praised 'red clothes suit you very well.' But she was actually deceived by the man who had praised her. However, the woman refused to accept the possibility, firmly believing that the two of them loved each other, treating his praise for the red dress as evidence... Hence, the dress was cursed as a result of her obsession. Then worried about her, parents or friends of the woman tried to take off her red dress. The instant the dress was ripped in the attempt, the woman died from shock."

Understood? Kokoro cocked her head.

"In other words, from that woman's perspective, the red dress had already become her own existence itself. This is the curse possessed by this cloth: The owner and the clothing become one organism. Since the senses are shared, I'll die if this clothing disappears completely. If ripped, I'll feel pain. For a normal person, simply ripping the clothing would probably lead to instant death? But since I've been training regularly, it's not a problem. Well then, since we have already melded together to become one organism—This clothing is also able to take on all injuries on behalf of the owner."

Haruaki looked at her legs and recalled the scene just now. Her wound had stopped bleeding and instead, her skirt vanished. Was that phenomenon the "curse" she was talking about?

"I believed someone once said that red is the symbol of blood and life. Hence, this red cloth has become the manifestation of 'life itself' for me. Simply by pressing it against injuries, it heals me. However, according to the amount of life required... In other words, the size of the wound, the red cloth's area is reduced in turn."

"I get it now. Just now, in order to treat your leg wound, you converted the skirt portion into life force, resulting in the skirt's disappearance..."

Something like that? So whenever you're locked in an intense battle, you expose more and more of your body as time goes on. This must be a rare item of boys' dreams~"

"How absolutely ridiculous. Although I'm totally not feeling proud at all, let me say this straight... Despite the similarities in properties and form, yours is a lower level Wathe compared to mine. Ultimately, so long as we keep injuring you, that red cloth you're using for healing will eventually be consumed. An ability with such limitations is nothing to worry about at all."

Kuroe and Kirika offered their comments. Kokoro laughed "kaha."

"Limited huh... Then let me ask you, doesn't a limit that can be replenished repeatedly count as infinite?"

Reaching towards the sack behind her, Kokoro pulled out a Santa outfit that used to be either Zenon's or Ganon's and casually pressed it against her lower body. Then for some reason—

This time, the Santa outfit disappeared without trace while the earlier skirt reappeared anew.

"An organism born from the union of two. In that case, it's not surprising that this clothing can eat like a human, right? Nourishment is very simple. Any red cloth will do. With that, this thing will automatically regenerate any lost area."

"Red cloth is its food... huh? I get it now."

"So do I~ The 'Santa Hunter' started appearing not long before that dark-skinned girl was attacked... Simply stated, red cloth is akin to herbs or potions for her, right? In other words, red cloth basically serves as the healing items she prepares before a fight. That red scarf is probably one of them."

"I... see... But—In that case! Before becoming the 'Santa Hunter,' you abducted people along with their red clothing? Couldn't you have just stolen the clothes? Why did you do that? Where are they now!?"

"Well, that serves as something like insurance. Because I had some free time before making contact with that hunter from the Lab Chief's Nation, it was a way to kill time as well. Basically I made preparations beforehand. Although the target could be anyone, I was thinking I might as well replenish my stock of red cloth as well, so I picked them based on the color

of their clothes... Hmm, but it turns out I have no need for insurance or a restock of red cloth."

"No need...?"

In response to Haruaki's question, Kokoro sighed, blinked and made an exasperated expression.

"Do I really need to spell it out? Although you mustered some energy as a result of anger... It's no good. I'm so disappointed that I'm ashamed of making all sorts of preparations beforehand. I deliberately extended my explanation with useless, rambling details, but why haven't you used this opportunity to launch a surprise attack? I was really looking forward to when you'd attack. Say, that katana looks like it's gonna puke, even you—Back when you pierced my thigh, what were you afraid of?"

Fear's shoulders shook. Then she raised her voice as though trying to cover up something:

"I-I'm not afraid of anything!"

"Really? Then take a better look at this blood. This is your handiwork after all, so you should be gazing at it more joyfully with greater pride, watching with greed and intoxication. Next, you'll make me bleed even more, right? I am your enemy, so that's only natural. After all, my wounds will heal so don't hold back. Don't sweat the small stuff and do whatever you wanna do. Pierce me as much as you want, stir as much as you want, let your emotions rise as high as you want!"

"S-Shut up, shut up...! Stop saying those... strange things...!"

Fear's hands were trembling, her face distorted. Rather than watching Kokoro, her eyes were focused on the color smeared over the tip of her drill, the color sticking tightly to Kokoro's white thigh.

She did not want to stare at or be aware of that red color.

Fear was being forced to look at them. She had no choice but to be aware of them, forced to stare at them.

Seeing Fear's response, Kokoro frowned and scratched her head gruffly in an unladylike manner while she looked up at the night sky in the alley.

"Ah~ Just as I thought... SO. TOTALLY. BORING~!"

She spat her words out one by one, roaring as though she were agitated from the bottom of her heart. Then she stared with displeasure at the group:

"Seriously, this is such a killjoy. Whether the hunter from the Lab Chief's Nation or the cube for torture and execution... I already went out of my way to visit, so let me play to my heart's content... Ah~ Damn it, this really can't be helped. As much as I hate letting things drag on, I guess there's no other way."

Next, she turned around decisively and headed towards—

Zenon and Ganon, still unconscious on the ground.

"Hold it right there!" "Yeah, what she said!"

Gasping, Kirika and Kuroe both extended their weapons. However, Kokoro drew her strange sword from the cuboid scabbard again and severed the belt and the hair. Haruaki also dashed forward but could only count on limited assistance from Konoha who was enduring the smell of blood. I'm not going to make it!

Who knew where Kokoro harbored such brute strength in her body, but she loaded up Zenon and Ganon onto her shoulder together.

"W-Wait up...! What are you planning to do with them!?"

"Huh? Simply stated, they are hostages. Nothing more than hostages. I've heard a bit about you guys from Satsuko and Fourteen. You seem to be very considerate of your friends? In that case, this should motivate you to bring out your full power and become a bit stronger? Otherwise, I'd feel really troubled. The time will be tomorrow night... What a pain, let's just make it midnight. The place will be—There's a place out in the countryside that's like an abandoned factory, right? Go there or else I'll kill these two. For the next day or so, go ahead and imagine bad outcomes and accumulate as much resentment, hate and anger as possible to make you serious. Who knows what I'm gonna do... Perhaps I'm a lesbian? Or maybe I'll enjoy these two sisters simultaneously? Stuff like that~"

Ending with extreme melancholy, Kokoro finished speaking and broke into a run. As a final struggle, Kuroe and Kirika attacked once more but the hair and the belt were sliced just as before. With unsteady footsteps, Fear threw out the wheel of torture but it was deflected back. Haruaki's speed could not catch up with her. Damn it, was there no other way to stop the

enemy—Just as Haruaki thought that, a certain dark-skinned being stirred in the corner of his vision.

"Oh?"

Having put the weird sword away, Kokoro turned her head back and caught a small object that was flying towards her. An oval-shaped machine component. This was probably one of the vending machine parts that Un Izoey had grabbed with her foot and thrown towards the enemy like an arrow.

Kokoro only stopped for an instant to look briefly at the machinery fragment. Laughing nonchalantly:

"Hmm... Oh, I'd have no complaints if you could get serious. After all, you're my initial target, hunter. I have such great hopes for you... Oh crap, I almost forgot because I was so surprised by how weak you guys are. You're carrying something that looks like a cube, right?"

They did. It was the cube that Un Izoey had snatched and was now being kept in Fear's possession. The cube that allegedly granted mankind's greatest wish—the ability to bring the dead back to life.

"..."

"Hmm, looks like you still have it. That's great to know. You guys probably have one or two people you'd like to resurrect, right? Although I originally wanted to keep it for my own use—"

"S-Stop talking nonsense! As if... anyone... would use that kind of thing!"

Fear bit her lower lip and roared angrily. Kokoro cocked her head in puzzlement.

"Wha? Why?"

"I have no idea how it's used, but it's cursed, right? In any case, nothing good will surely come out of it! Also, Aiko's not dead... Absolutely... She's still alive...!"

"What a weird girl you are. Why do you sound like it's unforgivable to even consider the possibility of that person's death? Although I don't quite understand, is someone currently in a half-dead state? Like a vegetable or something? Hmm~ Anyway, that thing really is an important tool that can make a dead person come back to life."

"Cut the crap and shut up...! Anyway, she's not dead so we don't need it!"

Fear yelled out emotionally while she pressed against her chest that was hurting from Kokoro's words.

Haruaki could understand Fear's feelings, but at the same time, he felt doubtful. Even himself, he was trying as hard as he could not to think about the cube or the unease surrounding Aiko. He was trying his best not to consider the possibility that she might not wake up again.

However, Haruaki felt that Fear was taking things even more extreme than him. All along, she was convincing herself not to consider that possibility, even going so far as to think she would rather die than accept it. It was a minor difference but one that held monumental significance. Haruaki recalled what Fear's attitude towards the cube this morning when she deliberately downplayed its existence. Back then, he had also felt a sense of dissonance.

Of course, he hoped that Aiko was still alive and did not want to use the cube. But could Fear's attitude be explained simply through this obvious reason—?

But Haruaki only had an instant to ponder this question that had no answer as he watched Kokoro shrug with disinterest.

"Don't get so worked up. How incomprehensible. Anyway, I just wanted to say, that object is precious enough that I want to keep it by my side at all times. Although I could take it back by force right now, it's too troublesome. Don't forget to bring it with you tomorrow. That's all. Ciao."

She spoke casually as though it were an afterthought.

Then carrying those two people, Kokoro disappeared into the darkness of the night.

Part 2

"Damn... it... A day for... wishes to come true... What a load of rubbish...!"

Fear took the envelope containing the hard-earned wages for her part-time job and smacked it hard against the table. The sound reverberated inside the quiet living room of the Yachi residence and slowly dissipated.

Earlier, they had tried their utmost to chase after Kokoro but still could not locate her. During this time, the cake shopkeeper had been looking for them due to their sudden disappearance and happened to call. To avoid worrying the shopkeeper unnecessarily, they had no choice but to return to the cake shop to formally conclude their job. As for Zenon and Ganon who had disappeared together with their Santa outfits, they could only make up some cliched excuse to gloss over the issue.

"This is the absolute worst... Christmas. With this, Zenon and Ganon..."

"It's all... my fault. I shouldn't have asked them... if they wanted to wear Santa costumes... That's right, I'm such an idiot. Since we were planning to bait the 'Santa Hunter' into making an appearance, wearing Santa outfits naturally resulted in greater risk...! How could I have overlooked this point? Damn it!"

Haruaki clenched his fist. In front of him was a cup of tea that Konoha had brewed to help calm him down—But he currently had no mood for tea at all. Haruaki could not tolerate his own stupidity at all.

"It's not your fault alone, Haruaki-kun. Of course, I would have stopped them if I felt it would be dangerous. I originally thought that since we were working together, it would be impossible for them to be targeted and was carelessly negligent... I am responsible too."

"I just think that it's totally unproductive to point fingers and lay the blame at this point..."

"Kuroe-kun is right. Right now, we have other problems to contemplate."

Haruaki was currently thinking about two people. Zenon, who always acted calm and collected, greeting them with gentleness every time they visited the superintendent's office. Ganon, who always acted like a school physician whenever they were injured, helping them bandage and treat their wounds despite her favorite catchphrase of 'so tiring.'

"...There's nothing to think about. What we need to do is rescue the two of them. If she wants a fight, then so be it, let's go. When the appointed time comes, we must show our true power and defeat that girl...!"

"That's all we can do. For that purpose, what we must do first... is definitely not hammering the table."

"I know... We should get rested and save up our energy first."

Saying that, Fear stood up. Call me if there's anything—Leaving these words behind, she left the living room. A while after the sound of the sliding door was heard, Konoha turned to Haruaki, displaying a gentle smile that might have been made deliberately:

"Haruaki-kun, it's probably best if you go to bed now."

"But... I can't sleep, the way things are currently..."

"You must sleep even if you can't. Go take a bath first if you need to, then please lie down and close your eyes. If you're out of energy, Haruaki-kun, even with my assistance, your movements will be sluggish. Do you really want to go save Zenon-san and Ganon-san in that kind of state?"

Despite her gentle demeanor, there was a certain forcefulness that compelled obedience. Evidently, her words were very correct and strict.

"I get it... I'll go to bed. As for a bath... Never mind... for today..."

Despite feeling Kirika's gaze that seemed as though she wanted to say something, Haruaki had no energy to strike a conversation with her. Walking past Kuroe who was pondering something blankly and Un Izoey who was staring at the ceiling expressionlessly, Haruaki left the living room as well.

While walking along the corridor to his bedroom, Haruaki heard a thud from Fear's room. It sounded like she was throwing her pillow or beating on it. Haruaki halted before her door, hesitated for a moment but did not call out to her in the end.

...Because he was most likely going to do the same thing once he returned to his room.

Lying on the futon, Fear was gazing up at the dark ceiling.

She was unable to sleep. She could not possibly sleep.

However, recovering her energy was necessary. She must sleep even though she could not fall asleep. Feeling unmotivated to retrieve the pillow she had thrown just now out of extreme frustration, she casually tossed and turned. Then a certain object by her pillow side leapt into view.

Right—She remembered and smiled with slight self-mockery.

This was the sock she had prepared several days earlier. However—

(Santa Claus... Definitely won't be coming.)

It was said that he only visited people who were asleep, which meant that he was probably not going to visit her since she could not sleep. Even if he arrived, Fear would surely grab him tightly and not let go, then—No matter how great a present he brought, she would disregard it and complain to him greatly.

Complaining: This isn't what I want right now.

(Ahhh... I'm so... stupid and willful... I'm totally not... a good girl...)

Hence, he definitely was not coming. He was not visiting someone like her who was always harboring troublesome wishes. Rescuing Zenon and Ganon, lifting her curse to become like a human, seeing Aiko again. See, these were all so troublesome. Each and every wish could not be easily realized.

Santa Claus was not coming, neither was anyone going to fulfill her wishes. In that case—

She could only count on herself.

Fear gripped the Rubik's cube in her hand even harder as she glared viciously at the ceiling.

Glaring at the ceiling where Santa Claus was not going to descend.

Returning to the guest room with the Japanese sword's incarnation, Un Izoey found the room in the same state as when last night's intruder was repelled—with a large hole still in the ceiling. This is also because of me—Un Izoey thought.

She could hear the Japanese sword sigh lightly behind her. Clearly now was not the time for this—That sort of sentiment was being expressed by that sigh. Thinking from her standpoint, indeed, compared to monitoring Un Izoey, she would rather rest properly in preparation for the battle tomorrow.

However—This was all meaningless.

Un Izoey remained in one spot. Without getting into the futon that was laid out on the tatami floor, she simply stood.

"...What's the matter?"

"My question: I ask if that boy has already slept?"

"He should be sleeping in his room... What about Haruaki-kun?"

Perhaps because the conversation was related to him, the Japanese sword behind her answered in a stiff tone of voice.

"Then I judge that I need not worry about him anymore. My wish: please allow me to do an action. Please permit me to do pamakupeya."

"Pama... what did you say?"

"...I have no knowledge how to express correctly in Japanese. I don't know if this concept exists or not. However, if I had to say it—indeed—"

What was the right word that could describe the act she should be doing next? Un Izoey searched for a similar term. She knew the word for doing the same thing under sunlight, so substituting the idea—

"Should be moonbathing."

"What... In terms of Japanese, I'm not sure if it really exists or not... Whatever, I get it. If it's just briefly, I'll let you do it."

"Much thanks."

Un Izoey nodded lightly and left the room. Naturally, the Japanese sword followed behind her. Opening the glass door leading to the veranda, Un Izoey walked barefooted into the garden without putting sandals on.

"Ahhh, seriously... Please remember to wipe your feet before entering the house. By the way, why do you need to be concerned about Haruaki-kun's whereabouts when you're moonbathing—"

What strange words she's uttering—Un Izoey thought to herself. I do have some sense of shame at leastNext, Un Izoey stood in the center of the garden, in that space illuminated by the cold moonlight—

Then she began to strip.

"Wha... Hold on...!?"

She could feel the Japanese sword's incarnation watching her uncomfortably while paying attention to the direction of the boy's room from time to time. Meanwhile, Un Izoey took off all her clothing, rendering

herself completely nude. The wind, colder than anything she had ever felt in her birthplace, brushed against her naked skin.

She gazed up at the night sky above. Just like in her homeland, the moon was giving off radiance. Spreading her legs slightly, she stood on the ground. The land remained firmly composed just like in her homeland. Closing her eyes, she experienced everything.

The cold wind caused her hair to sway lightly. The atmosphere embraced her chest. She focused all these sensations into her navel. Similarly, she felt the ground's texture beneath the soles of her feet. The grass' breath and the earth's presence rose up along her feet. Covering her ankles, moving along her thighs, gently caressing her lower abdomen, the world's energies were reaching her navel.

Circulation followed by acceptance. She believed this was necessary.

She believed that having become weak, she could only rely on these things.

For the girl who was watching this scene, from those girls' perspectives, this was probably impossible to understand. They probably considered it a primitive ritual without actual effect. That was fine. It simply implied that to them, this was a type of unknown.

The man, who had told her about the struggle between the known and the unknown, surfaced in her mind.

He had not rejected the tribe's rules and rituals. He had said: Just as my knowns are your unknowns, your knowns may also be my unknowns. How very interesting. Perhaps there really is a power there. So long as there's an unverifiable unknown, I will never reject your perspective—



Precisely because she had heard him say that, she was doing this now. Even if only just a bit, she hoped to obtain power.

Facing the pure moonlight, Un Izoey spread her arms wide.

Ahhh.

I am cursed Although she did not wish to remember that particular instant which had been carved into her mind, she still recalled it. She had entered the battle as a warrior while the Lab Chief's younger sister had mustered everything she had to fight back, doing that for the sake of victory. This was the curse she had bestowed. Nevertheless, Un Izoey did not hate her for that. It was only natural for a warrior to make use of everything to secure victory. She could only blame her own carelessness.

Everything stemmed from the fact of her being cursed. Her entire pace had been ruined because of that. In her current state, she probably could not even catch an elderly rabbit. So weak. Her cursed self was so weak.

If she were strong, there would be no problem. In order to shoulder her responsibilities, she had only one course of action. Namely, to retrieve her mighty strength. Even if she started now, could she still make it in time?

No, she had to make it in time. There was no choice but to make it in time.

Hence, hence—

(Ahhh seriously, hurry and put on some clothes. If Haruaki-kun were to wake up, then what...!?)

Konoha monitored Un Izoey for quite a while, her heart racing in trepidation. After a while, Un Izoey slowly turned to face her once again. Standing in a natural posture over there, her dark-skinned body was laid completely bare and exposed in full view under the moonlight, unconcerned with Konoha's gaze. At least cover up with a hand or something—Just as Konoha thought that, she suddenly came to a realization. Un Izoey's eyes were originally devoid of emotional fluctuation but looking at them now, they seemed to be seriously trying to convey a certain message.

"I understand your wariness. However, I judge the current situation is not a situation to be concerned with that. My danger: the fact enemy is targeting opportunity. Therefore—"

Maintaining eye contact, she continued in a calm tone of voice:

"My demand: please return weapons."

"I know what you're trying to say. The Draconians' targets include you. In order to engage the enemy, you need weapons. Nevertheless—I'm sorry but I still cannot trust you completely."

"I vow: even after getting weapons, I will not attack your side, this kind of vow."

"I already said no, even if you say that..."

Un Izoey exhaled. Then Konoha heard it.

A sincere voice, filled with determination.

"Then—if no matter what, you won't believe me, use your sharp blade to kill me now is fine. As you can see, completely unguarded state right now. I gladly accept."

"What!?"

"My judgment: that Draconian is very strong. The next time attacked, unarmed will lose without a doubt. Since turning into corpse happens eventually—Turning into a corpse here right now is the same."

"...Are you serious?"

The gray hair shook up and down. Konoha shrugged and sighed in shock.

"I really hope you're just spouting Japanese that you don't understand completely. It's not like you're Ueno-san, to think you'd utter such stupid words, truly incomprehensible. Putting that aside, your complete nudity is starting to make me feel embarrassed instead, so hurry up and put your clothes on—"

While speaking, Konoha made a thrust with her knife hand without any warning at all.

She aimed straight for the vital among vitals, namely, the heart.

Un Izoey still did not dodge. Completely motionless.

At the very last moment, Konoha bent her fingers and did not allow her barehanded thrust to complete its mission of gouging the heart out. A red

line appeared on top of that dark-skinned bulge. Because she did not wish to see it, Konoha did not look. Rather, she returned Un Izoey's gaze that was focused intently on her—Then she sighed.

"...I understand now. After all, these are exceptional times."

"Very thankful for your understanding."

"However, I must still warn you not to try anything reckless. Even with your weapons returned, we won't be defeated so easily by you. Also, although it shouldn't be necessary to state explicitly—Should you dare think of doing anything to Haruaki-kun..."

Konoha slowly opened her tightly clenched fist then traced her fingertip lightly across the shallow incision she had just made. The dark-skinned curve shook slightly and a groan was heard.

"I shall murder thee. Thou shouldst know very well the sight of an disemboweled beast, uncivilized hunter?"

"...Affirmative."

Good grief—Konoha reduced the pressure in her glare and stepped back. "Anyway, put your clothes back on first." After she said that, Un Izoey obediently picked up her clothes and put them on... Although it was completely unimportant, Konoha wondered if those panties felt uncomfortable, buried deeply between her butt cheeks. As soon as Un Izoey was dressed, Konoha took out the knife, elastic bowstring, handcuffs and key that she kept in her pocket at all times and handed them back. Un Izoey returned the knife to the holster beneath her skirt and wrapped the bowstring around her left big toe with great familiarity, then applied the handcuffs to one hand only.

"I really couldn't keep the darts with me so I hid them in my room. Follow me."

"...Entering the house is double waste of effort. I decide to give up."

A double waste of effort? Konoha pondered the meaning of those words. If entering the house was a waste of effort, it meant that Un Izoey still had other things to do outside. That would be—?

As Konoha finally realized the meaning, Un Izoey sprang into action at the same time. Click, she snapped the other side of the handcuffs to the

second hand. In other words, she was back in the combat stance she last displayed at the cultural festival—

"Very unfortunate, I judge this is a very naive judgment."

A dark-skinned thigh lifted up as she drew something out from beneath her skirt.

Despite being of one color, the flash of solid silver flying forward did not meld with the moonlight.

Part 3

A certain metallic clang caused Haruaki to wake up and open his eyes. This was a familiar sound that he had heard many times to this date. It was the noise made when two metallic objects collided.

Frantically, he flipped the blanket over and rushed out of his room. The noise originated from the garden.

"W-Why...?"

Incomprehensible, without any prior warning signs. Neither could Haruaki deduce the intentions behind her current behavior. But right now, he was confronted with the sight of Un Izoey wielding a knife in her foot as she engaged Konoha in battle.

"I'm not sure what the situation is exactly but you've finally showed your true colors! Cow Tits, how did you let her steal back her weapon!?"

Perhaps having heard the same noise, Fear also rushed out of her room. Figuring out the situation instantly, she transformed her Rubik's cube into the hatchet and charged into the garden.

"I did deliberate over it...!"

"I don't want to listen to your excuses, dummy!"

Un Izoey blocked their attacks with the knife in her foot while slowly retreating. At this moment, the window in the accessory dwelling opened and Kuroe jumped down into the yard with a frown. Kirika soon ran outside as well.

"Un Izoey! You're still our enemy after all, aren't you!?"

Kirika's expression instantly turned grim as she extended the «Tragic Black River» with frightening momentum. Brandishing her knife as though she were dancing, Un Izoey performed a back flip, landed on both hands and jumped vertically with great force.

Silently, she landed on top of the boundary wall. Closer to the moonlight, her gray hair and dark-skinned complexion were illuminated dimly. Standing at that height, she looked down at Haruaki's group without saying a word.

Kirika gritted her teeth so hard that it almost produced noise.

"What on earth... are you trying to do!? What are your intentions!?"

"I give an explanation of not planning any scary plan. I just made a judgment—judging I should return to the Lab Chief's Nation. Reason: I give the reason that there is nothing to do here now."

"You're saying... You have nothing you need to do... What about the Draconians!?"

"Unrelated to me. The enemy chose me as target without consent. No duty to play with her. I ignore. If she chase again, then I will fight her. Whether the scheduled battle or the abducted normal people—My opinion: I repeat unrelated to me."

"Stop screwing around...! That girl only came to this town because you're here! That's why Zenon and Ganon were caught up in this! Everything started with you!"

"If I need to look for another explanation, I give 'I don't care.'"

Fear gripped the hatchet's handle hard. Stop screwing around—Haruaki secretly thought the same thing. How could it turn out like this? Although it was only for a few days, they had lived together. Despite how brief it was, they had also worked together. He clearly experienced that feeling as though there was some sort of mutual understanding.

"Then what about the superintendent... You have a letter to give him, right?"

"Current situation: impossible to complete. Since those two are abducted, even knowing his return date not possible. I give the judgment that new plan is needed."

"You mentioned that there's also... something 'you must find out,' right? What about that?"

Only after hearing Kuroe's question did Haruaki realize that Un Izoey did not seem to have that notebook hanging on her neck as she stood on the wall. Was it because she no longer needed it? Un Izoey's next words served to further support Haruaki's speculation.

"From the start, no proof to prove conclusion correct that research theme is 'finding information about Sekaibashi Gabriel.' Also, even if correct, since those two are abducted, getting more information is difficult. Rather than waste time, I should return and ask for Lab Chief's directions. Very simple, just ask him again what I need to know, problem solved."

Hearing that, Kirika frowned for some reason. However, Un Izoey took no notice. Bobbing her gray hair up and down, she continued:

"My thanks: protection and treatment. But I don't plan to involve in more troublesome things."

"Honestly speaking, you're free to escape as you please—As much as I'd like to say that, we currently need manpower urgently. Since the Draconians' target is you, at the very least, you could act as bait to attract their attention. We can't let you go so easily."

Konoha took a step forward. Fear also transformed the hatchet into the execution stake and raised it above her head. Kuroe's hair began to writhe restlessly while Kirika's belt stayed on high alert. However, Un Izoey simply watched this scene calmly. Bending over slightly, she reached her arm towards her left foot.

"! ...I don't recall returning the darts to you...!"

"My hint: this is what I do when darts used up in middle of hunt. This is natural."

Pulling the bowstring that was wrapped around her big toe, she placed on it an extremely ordinary pebble that was most likely picked up in the garden while she was fighting Konoha. These pebbles would turn into terrifying bullets once shot using her arm strength and skill. Then right now, this bow was aiming at—

"Haruaki-kun!"

Konoha chopped with her hand and struck down the stone projectile flying towards Haruaki. But Un Izoey proceeded to shoot even more pebbles.

"Yachi, get down!"

"Tsk—Mechanism No.23 hole type, thorned surface form: «Maranatha», Curse Calling!"

"Mode: «Cushioning Munemori»!"

Using her immortal body, Kirika hugged Haruaki and pushed him onto the ground. Fear held up the bed of nails to act as a shield while Kuroe extended a defensive net of black hair. Thanks to them, none of Un Izoey's bullets could strike Haruaki.

"Yachi, are you okay?"

"S-Sorry. Rather, are you okay, Class Rep?"

"Yeah, but putting that aside—"

"She escaped. To think I clearly threatened her that harshly already... Next time I see her, I'm not going to let her off that easily...!"

Konoha glared at the wall viciously. Just as she pointed out, Un Izoey was gone out of view. Not only Konoha but everyone else focused their gaze where she had disappeared.

"I originally thought... she'd stay with us until the end...!"

Kuroe murmured softly and returned her hair to its original length. Fear turned her gaze away from the wall while putting the Rubik's cube away. Bowing her head slightly, she spoke softly:

"No... way... I knew it all along. She is not an ally."

Kirika nodded in agreement. Expressionless, she seemed to suppressing something deep in her heart.

Sounding as though she were speaking for herself to hear, Fear added quietly:

"After all, she's someone from the Lab Chief's Nation."

"...As well as being a core member."

"And also part of those people who went as far as to lie about putting a bomb in the school in order to learn about my structure."

"It simply happened to be a lie. Those people are the type that I won't be surprised if they did it for real."

"And they even tried to take you back by force."

"Yes, I won't forget. I will never believe them again."

"Those guys really are the worst... So, I'm not shocked by this. Un Izoey is one of them, so she must be that kind of person. That's all there is to it. Indeed, that's all... there is to it—"

"Well said. They are the absolute worst. I definitely cannot approve of them. I can't possibly view them in positive light, neither can I understand them... But..."

For some reason, Kirika suddenly stopped speaking there.

...As though hesitating over a certain matter, as though troubled over a certain matter.

Several seconds later, she clenched her fist tight, took a deep breath and—

"But... That's not right! Ahhh, how absolutely ridiculous!"

Kirika punched the wall hard. This sudden action startled Fear, causing her to hunch her shoulders and turn to look at Kirika. Naturally, Haruaki and the others turned towards her as well. Keeping her fist against the wall, Kirika continued to breath out with agitation.

"Cl-Class Rep, what's with you? What's not right...?"

"Not right. Clearly not right. That girl—was lying."

"Lying...?"

Indeed—Kirika nodded. She frowned as though feeling disgust from the bottom of her heart:

"That Pakuaki loves learning new things and instructing others. The fact that he did not directly tell Un Izoey what she needed to find out... It means that 'the unknown of what she needed to find out' only held meaning if she discovered it herself. In that case, even if she asked him, I don't think that

man would tell her. Because if he told her, then the unknown is transmuted into something completely different and worthless to know. Arghh, damn it, absolutely ridiculous... As much as I hate knowing, I still ended up understanding this. How absolutely annoying!"

Kirika bit her lower lip and continued:

"Un Izoey can't possibly fail to understand that Pakuaki is that kind of man. Precisely because she was hanging around him in the same organization, I can tell from her eyes. She sincerely relies on and understands Pakuaki. If someone like her were to go back and ask him what she should be finding out, such an act that runs counter to Pakuaki's intentions would be truly unnatural. At least, I can only ascertain that she's lying about her reasons for leaving."

"But... In actual fact, she did flee. Going back to her faction because of danger is only natural, right?"

"Even so, there's no need to lie, right? Why did she have to say that...?"

Konoha inclined her head slightly. Haruaki also pondered. Why? Reason. Cause. Incomprehensible. Then let's start thinking of possibilities. No way. Indeed. No way. Supposing she fled this home not for the sake of returning to the Lab Chief's Nation—what remaining possibilities were there—?

An ominous premonition began to occupy Haruaki's stomach. No way... How could that be possible...

"Muu... She lied... But in fact, she did leave this house... What exactly is she thinking...?"

Also contemplating the same questions apparently, Fear crossed her arms as she began to pace back and forth in the garden. However, she suddenly halted in her tracks. She seemed to have stepped on something. Bending over, she picked it up.

"What is this... Muu, it's this thing? How did it drop here...?"

Haruaki leaned forward to see what Fear was holding. It was the notebook that had been hanging on Un Izoey's neck all along until now.

"Oh, during the moonbathing... How should I say this? In any case, many things happened. Many things."

Konoha shrugged as though she were recalling a certain matter. Haruaki carelessly took the notebook from Fear's hand. Although he did not expect any message left behind, he still flipped through it to check.

Only the the first few pages had been used. Just as seen previously, her extremely distorted handwriting was used to scribble down various useless facts regarding the superintendent. On the last page where words were written, a line of even more distorted words read: "Secretary. Cashier. Very fast. Older sister. Drunk." During the Santa part-time job, she had also approached them sneakily~ Haruaki recalled.

The next page was blank. There really was nothing? Just as Haruaki was about to close the notebook—He suddenly noticed something...

There were signs that a page had been ripped off. Judging from the sequence, it was written on after the part-time job was over—

At this moment, Haruaki noticed something else and scrutinized even more closely.

On the page that he had originally deemed blank, in other words, the one that came after the page that was ripped off, there were faintly visible words. Haruaki frantically ran into the living room and spread the page out under the fluorescent lighting. Fear and the rest also leaned forward to watch.

In that instant, Haruaki remembered.

Un Izoey held her pencil like a child. Due to writing in that manner, she pressed hard on the paper; and due to pressing hard on the paper, she said that using pencil was better—

Precisely because of that, this resulted.

The words she wrote were imprinted faintly onto the next page.

"Towards the end, that girl... She threw something like an mechanical metal part at Kokoro, right?"

"A component shaped like a dart. If it's just a piece of paper, it's possible to pierce it and launch it towards the enemy like a letter delivered by arrow... An absolutely ridiculous deduction, however."

"Then—That Kokoro took a glance after catching it, right..."

Without a doubt. It was done during then.

Without letting anyone else know, Un Izoey had sent a message to the enemy.

Imprinted on the blank page that followed was her uniquely distorted handwriting that was no different from a blackmail note's.

Request. Push forward 24 hours early. I come alone.

The appointed date was tomorrow, right at midnight when the date was changing. Twenty-four hours early would be—

Haruaki looked up at the clock. The hands were now currently pointing at midnight.

"That... country girl... is really an inconceivably... great big idiot!"

Fear clutched the Rubik's cube tightly and stood up abruptly. Of course, Haruaki and the rest also got up to their feet. If one had to give a reason, surely everyone was the same.

Fear was right, Un Izoey really was an incurable idiot.

Hence—

Even though she was not an ally—

Even though members of the Lab Chief's Nation could not be trusted at all—

They felt obliged to go give her a good scolding.

Part 4

There was no time to care about attire or making themselves presentable. After calling for a taxi, they hurried over to the abandoned factory that Kokoro had indicated.

In order not to make the taxi driver suspicious, they got off slightly before their destination, then ran madly at full speed.

Ahead of them was a mechanical factory that had shut down a long time ago. Faint light was cast by a street lamp on the road in the distance.

Combined with the fortunate presence of moonlight, it was not too dark to see ahead.

Traversing over a locked gate, Haruaki's group invaded the factory. Within the vast confines, countless pieces of scrap metal were left lying around. Most of these probably did not belong to the original factory but were dumped here illegally later on, resulting in a mountain of junk without any sense of unity. Automobile chassis without tires, rusted refrigerators, structural steel, CRT televisions without outer shells, bathtubs with residues of green water.

As soon as Haruaki's group reached their destination, the first thing they heard was simply a scream.

In other words—

They were too late.

"Ah... Ahhhhhhhh!"

"Good grief—I was thinking you'd get slightly more serious but you're still no good. The same goes for you... What are you afraid of? Hey, show me some spirit here and put in more force."

Un Izoey was lying face up on the ground with Kokoro stepping on her shoulder and the excessively decorated weird sword piercing through her wrist area.

Spurting incessantly and spattering outside was pain and suffering colored like the heart. Flowing across the dark-colored skin, the liquid also contaminated Un Izoey's hand. That hand was convulsing intensely due to pain as well as an even more compelling reason.

"Gu, ah... Gah...!"

"Where are you looking at, are you that concerned about your hand? Hmm? Your hand has merely been dyed bright red by blood, nothing special, right? Or do you have some kind of traumatic memory?"

Hearing that, Haruaki's group finally understood.

They finally understood why Kokoro could injure Un Izoey despite how powerful she was in the past, why Un Izoey's movements had become so

restrained, why she lost balance so easily. Thinking back, she had seemed quite strange all along.

Everything—All of this dated back to the cultural festival when Kirika sought victory by forcing her to commit taboo; was that incident still affecting her?

"Huff, huff... Guh...!"

"! —Ohoh, that's right, that's right. Show me your perseverance, hurry...!"

Un Izoey kicked upwards while lying on the ground, controlling the knife that was held on the tip of her foot, stabbing into Kokoro's upper arm as though in retaliation. As Kokoro's arm dangled powerlessly, the knife continued to savor the sensations of flesh and blood by cutting sideways. Opening up the wound then turning back and forth, the wound was further enlarged.

"Kufuoo... Yes, very good, give me more. I want più, più, più! Don't sweat the small stuff, bring it on, bring it on, kahahahahaha! See, you're about to sever it. My arm is about to be cut into two! With that, you could very well win. Hurry up and show your true power!"

Blood gushed out like mad. The arm's flesh was ripped open. The whiteness of bone could be seen faintly. Due to the arm's own weight, the incision was pulled even wider. The interior of the organism known as humans was exposed. Kokoro was not only enjoying this abuse of the flesh but also twisting the weird sword that was stabbed into Un Izoey's wrist whenever the wound in her arm was being stirred. She seemed to be trying to use this pain to stimulate more of Un Izoey's battle instincts. Totally nauseating.

Nevertheless, when Kokoro's arm was roughly severed halfway, the movements of the knife wielded in Un Izoey's foot began to grow sluggish while the twitching of her hand further intensified.

Kokoro frowned and clicked her tongue with boredom from the bottom of her heart.

"A~Ah... So it's no good after all? How boring. Hey, why did you come alone if you're gonna act like this? Are you a moron?"

The gushing blood suddenly stopped. First to disappear were the sleeves of her red uniform, followed by the shoulders then even the fabric in front of

her chest vanished—At the same time, the nearly severed arm's messy wound gradually healed up. Due to the cursed cloth's surface area being consumed to treat the wound, her upper body ended up almost unclothed except for underwear. Perhaps because she did not think it was necessary to stick to a uniform color scheme to that extent, her underwear was white. But due to the blood from her arm seeping to her underwear, it had acquired a slightly red color. On top of one of her well-developed breasts was a tattoo. Similar to Satsuko's tattoo but different, Kokoro's tattoo was carved using a dragon's «Jaws» as a motif.

Kokoro seemed to have completely lost interest in Un Izoey and did not deliver a final blow, simply withdrawing her sword directly. Then finally—she turned her gaze towards Haruaki's group.

"Hi... Whether this girl or you guys, you're all so impatient. I already picked tomorrow so go ahead and rest properly first. However, this does mean you should be highly motivated now, so it doesn't really matter."

While saying that, she pulled out a Santa costume from the sack on her back and pressed it against her chest. Using this as nourishment, her red uniform silently reappeared.

"Motivation? Of course... If you really want to see it, I'll show it to you! Stand right there and don't move!"

Her clenched fist trembling all this time, Fear kicked the scrap metal by her feet and charged forward.

"—Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi»!"

Using the momentum from her rapid dash, Fear swung the giant hatchet. Kokoro evaded by jumping back lightly and landing on a small mountain of scrap metal behind her. Fear did not stop running and continued to chase her up the small mountain, swinging the hatchet—No, the weapon was no longer a hatchet.

"Mechanism No.22 bludgeoning type, spike-ball form: «Morgenstern», Curse Calling!"

"Kaha! So many variations, hey!"

Kokoro twisted her body while raising her sword up high as a shield, swinging it down to parry the spiked metal club's destructive force.

Instantly, she frowned, most likely due to the strange sensation she felt through her hand. In the next second, after the spiked club was deflected, the scrap metal flew apart like an explosion where the morningstar had struck—Very likely, Fear's intended target was not Kokoro's body but the scrap metal underfoot.

All sorts of objects flew into the air. Broken CD players, air conditioner filters, bicycle tires. Then Fear acted even faster than those objects could fall—

"Mechanism No.21 hanging type, hook-claw form: «Spanish Spiders»!"

"Oh...?"

The countless scattered objects partially obscured Kokoro's line of sight. Making use of this instant of distraction, from the shadows of the stream of falling scrap metal, Fear extended several ensnaring hooks that were connected to chains. One of the hooks caught Kokoro's chest. Accompanied by the sound of ripping cloth, Kokoro's body was pulled forward at the same time. Victorious so far, Fear hastily transformed the torture tool again.

"—«Human-Perforator»!"

"...Woah!"

Seeing the drill hurtling straight at her, Kokoro swung her sword using pure arm strength alone and deflected the drill's tip by a hair's breadth. Fear clicked her tongue.

"Guh... Fufu, hahaha. Not bad..."

"What's not bad at all? Although only your clothes were damaged, you seem to be in quite some pain, right?"

"I've mentioned before, right? This «Bloodstained Reginetta» is another me. Our senses are shared. If the clothing is damaged, of course I'll feel pain... But more importantly, haha, you're really not bad. Compared to earlier, much better. Que splendida! I knew that angering you was a very effective move!"

"Angering us to make us serious is your goal, right? Then your goal is already accomplished! Until you're defeated, our wrath will not subside—So hurry up and release Zenon and Ganon!"

"Kaha. Yes~ I see... If you'll use that cube in your possession to trade with me, it's doable. Don't worry, I don't lie."

They already understood Kokoro's goal, perhaps understanding all too well. Basically, she wanted to fight strong enemies and make Fear and the others go all out. Zenon and Ganon should not have any further residual value for her.

Seeing Fear's gaze cast towards him, Haruaki nodded lightly. Konoha, Kuroe and Kirika did the same. If they truly believed that Aiko was still alive, there was no need for that "cube" at all. Furthermore, since it was a cursed tool, who knew what horrific tragedies would be caused by its use. Even though Haruaki himself was immune to curses, the more powerful the tool's effects, the greater the chance of the curse being invoked as the price for its power.

Yeah, that "cube" was not needed in the first place. There was even no need to find out how it was used. However, it was true that the desire to know existed somewhere deep in his heart, just like Fear who had involuntarily asked the attacker that night. Why was that? Because he was unable to believe with conviction, he wanted to find out about that cube's details? No, it was the opposite. Precisely because they were holding that cube in their possession, their conviction began to waver—Only because of that, they realized their conviction was not as firm as they believed, right?

Haruaki concluded it was the latter. What they believed was ultimately right. Aiko was simply sleeping. She was still alive. Perhaps this was self-deception, but presently that was the only thought permissible.

"No matter how special its power, I don't want to use a cursed tool at all. Furthermore, she's not dead. That girl... she's definitely... still alive..."

"Hmm? What's that?"

"...I-I'll give it to you... Keep your word!"

Fear took out the other cube from her pocket. This was the metallic "cube" that was slightly filthy. She tossed it towards Kokoro who gleefully caught it.

"I've returned it to you... Where are Zenon and Ganon? Hurry and release them!"

"I said I don't lie. I will release them... However, I've no idea if they will return or not."

Holding the cube in one hand, she turned around.

This space was illuminated only by the moonlight and the faint glow from the street lamp far out in the road outside the factory. The sound of someone stepping on scrap metal was heard from there.

Next to appear were Zenon and Ganon. They were not tied up. Unlike their earlier appearance, they were no longer in their underwear but clothed sloppily instead. The two of them were standing there expressionlessly.

Haruaki felt strange. Why didn't they escape? Why did Kokoro say that she had no idea if they will return or not—

Kokoro waved the cube lightly in her hand towards them and said:

"Yo... Hmm, so this is what's known as 'just as planned,' right?"

Zenon answered: "Looks like things are progressing smoothly, how wonderful."

Ganon answered: "After doing something so tiring, some returns at last."

The two of them remained expressionless respectively.

What was going on? What were they talking about? The two of them, what, why, how—Impossible—

Impossible to believe. Haruaki did not want to believe. However, Zenon bowed her head apologetically and spoke as usual:

"My utmost apologies, Yachi-sama. Having deceived you all along..."

Then lightly pulling her collar open—

She spoke each and every word clearly and distinctly:

"We are members of the Draconians."

On her chest was something identical to the emblem carved on Satsuko's body—

A tattoo imitating a dragon's scales.

Chapter 5 - What if He Makes a Mistake / "Still, Happy Xmas (War Is Over)"

Part 1

"I-Impossible..."

Haruaki groaned. Staring in wide-eyed shock, he could only groan.

Just now, Zenon—What had she said?

"Of course it's true. She carries a Wound on her body. You guys should know that it's proof of membership in the Draconians. Actually, there has always been many of us around you. It's just that you never noticed."

"How, impossible...!"

Kokoro waved her hand impatiently.

"It's actually true, so stop making a fuss. As for how many people were sent to this remote little island, that I'm not too sure. Despite some non-uniformity in quality, I see potential in these two... After engaging them in combat, I can tell that their skills are decent. More importantly, they even expressed their wish to observe a «High Single» in battle up close. Such spirit is commendable. Hence, ever since a few days ago when they came running to me, they've also been helping me with various troublesome chores as payment for their training. Although they failed that night, it was actually they who proposed leaving the job of retrieving the lost item to them. That's why I had them go to your house but didn't expect them to fail."

Haruaki pondered what her words meant—And immediately figured it out. The masked assailant who had sneaked into Un Izoey's room, she was actually Zenon or Ganon?

Fear's face became distorted to unprecedented levels as she gripped the drill tightly and yelled:

"Y-You two... Hurry up and say this is false...! Otherwise, why were you captured by this girl...!"

"Of course, we were the ones who proposed to Her Excellency Number Four to take part in this charade."

However, Zenon simply replied calmly—using the calm expression they had witnessed countless times in the superintendent's office.

"Besides, don't you find it quite unnatural for us to be helping you in your part-time job? Even if Yachi-sama did not make the suggestion, we would have offered ourselves to help, thereby giving us the chance to search your belongings under the pretext of changing, so as to recover this cube. However, you apparently kept it on your person, so the plan failed as well."

"So tiring... However, failing despite sneaking into your house in the middle of the night was our fault. Hence, left without a choice, we could only come up with the next plan, namely, to become hostages on purpose, thereby retrieving the cube through a hostage exchange. Ahhh, even explaining it is so tiring..."

"Kaha. In actual fact, there was no need to do that. Originally, I was thinking I'd get it done simply by attacking you guys directly. But because you're too weak, I decided to execute the fake hostage plan. In the beginning, these two suggested an exchange on the spot... But the way I saw it, compared to getting the cube back, I prefer seeing you guys mad with rage and bringing out your true power. Seriously, to think I made preparations already. Why couldn't you wait for a night? However, this does mean that you're currently full of fighting spirit, so it's fine anyway."

"We were... deceived...? All this time...!"

Hearing Fear's stunned whispers, Zenon and Ganon remained silent without changing their expressions.

At the same time, Kokoro's scarf was trembling in her delight.

"Kaha, forget about it, just let it go. Although I feel that a Draconians' style should be living every day in life or death situations, I don't reject this method of becoming strong by secretly training yourself every day. This also requires blending into the crowd in society, right? Anyway—you guys please don't forget, they are just the audience. Your opponent is me. At last, things have become fun now. Furthermore, I've retrieved the replenishing vessel."

"But... Didn't you mention that the materials were being kept somewhere else? I don't think you need to go out of your way to use it, right? Also, I believe that was precisely the reason why you chose to fight in this location."

Ignoring the questions and exclamations from Haruaki's group, Zenon asked Kokoro after hearing what she said. Zenon and Ganon was really not on their side, but on the enemy's—Haruaki felt compelled to confront this fact.

"No, the materials are right here. More accurately, they've been handled already. Continuing to feed them would be too much of a a hassle, so before making contact with the hunter, I had already made preparations. After all, they will keep for at least two or three days."

"...Is... that so?"

Zenon answered lightly and narrowed her eyes. Haruaki could not tell what she was thinking about.

"You two... What are you talking about...?"

"Kaha. Really? You guys have no idea what this is? You've been carrying it on you without knowing?"

"Of course we know. You mentioned it before! It's a cube for granting mankind's greatest wish—the cube for bringing the dead back to life!"

"Yes, that's true indeed, but that explanation is not enough. This cube is a replenishing vessel—A crucial component of this sword. It's totally useless on its own. Back when I first fought the hunter, I was too careless and she knocked it out."

"What...?"

Kokoro brought the cube near the guard of the sword in her hand. She plugged it in, clamped it with metal parts then connected it to the tubes dangling on the sword's side—Another mechanical accessory had been added to the weird sword that was already covered in decorations of mad science and death.

"Do you want to know how this thing is used? Kaha, very well, since I've already gone through the trouble of creation, plus the expiry date is fast approaching, this'll serve as a tool to liven up the mood. I'm really looking forward to you guys becoming stronger due to your roused emotions—Come, let's have a lively opening ceremony!"

Kokoro straightened her posture. In the next instant—

She swung the bizarre sword and split open the mountain of scrap metal next to her.

As the debris scattered, what lay beneath was composed of various mechanical parts, large and small—A cage. Presumably, it was created using the sword's power beforehand, just like the wreckage sword made from the vending machine.

"This sword is called the «Ritual Sword of Necromancy»... In an attempt to resurrect his wife, a mad scientist combined magic and science to create this demonic sword of life. Naturally, its power was born from being cursed—that was the method the scientist came up with to fulfill his wish. In other words—"

Blown away, the scrap metal rattled noisily as they fell on the ground.

Using this metallic clanging noise as her accompaniment, Kokoro continued simply:

"—It possesses the taboo ability to resurrect someone using another's life."

Inside the cage where Haruaki's group was staring at—

Two corpses were currently moving restlessly

Part 2

Haruaki stopped breathing. The shock was so immense that he even forgot to breathe.

The corpses were two young women in their underwear. Unblinking eyes. Their bodies were already discolored. Large wounds were found on their chests and abdomens respectively but they had stopped bleeding a long time ago. They were already dead beyond any doubt. Already dead, yet they stood inside the cage, swaying as though trying to seek balance. They were unlike those shown in movies. Neither did they make any moaning noises. Nevertheless, simply stated in the most common terms—They were essentially zombies.

Next, Haruaki noticed. Inside the cage, by the feet of the zombies, bulging from the floor of scrap metal, rounded shapes that differed from mechanical parts, lying there powerlessly—

An even greater sense of nausea was forcing its way up his throat. Four of them. There were four people. This number matched that of the missing persons case, which took place before the 'Santa Hunter' appeared, mentioned by the detective when he visited the cake shop to ask for clues. From the very start, Haruaki and his group were already too late to save them?

"Y-You... You bastard! How could you kill... completely uninvolved... h-humans...!"

"There's no need to get so worked up that you can't even speak, Fear-in-Cube. Haven't you killed hundreds, thousands of people in the past? In this regard, compared to me who only killed a necessary number of people, you're far more experienced, right?"

"S-Shut up, shut up...! What necessary number of people!? Are you saying that killing them is necessary!?"

"Yes, it counts as necessary... I guess? Although not to the point of being obligatory. This was simply insurance prepared in advance, also serving as a way to kill time. Too much preparation would make things very boring as well, so I was thinking roughly two people should be right. Then afterwards, all I did was restock red cloth. After discovering that it was actually the Christmas season right now, I quickly decided to target people in Santa suits... Since committing too many crimes would draw excessive attention, creating obstacles instead, so I decided to stop killing people. How about that, very humane, right?"

The case of people wearing red gone missing followed by the 'Santa Hunter' incident starting—Haruaki's group finally understood why the case had evolved like that. But right now, that was no longer important. Fear roared with greater anger:

"Stop screwing around, humane my ass! Also... You said two people? Stop lying! Over there... Over there... Aren't there four...!?"

"Oh~ You're quite right. Okay, lemme explain this a bit as well. Like I said before, this ceremonial sword's powers are related to "life." Just as the mad scientist wanted to resurrect his wife in a crazy manner, this sword can use other people's lives to bring someone back to life. One person's amount of life can be used to resurrect one person."

Haruaki desperately suppressed his urge to vomit. So that explained... this? There used to be four people but now there are two. Using two

people's lives, two other people were resurrected. What an utterly deplorable curse.

"Kaha, so... Given the recent incessant conflicts in the Middle East, I was raising a ruckus over there before coming over. But those guerillas and proper armies made a big deal over it and started calling me «Fifty Percentage», how vexing. All I did was annihilate one unit of troops and used half the corpses to attack the commanding officer. Of course, the ones who died directly to serve as fuel, rather than getting turned into moving corpses, were the lucky fifty percent."

"Guh... The brain of someone able to brag in this manner is truly impossible to understand...! So that cursed sword's ability is creating zombies through this kind of method!?"

"It's not limited to zombies. There are all kinds settings like 'resurrection extent' for example. If I put in a bit effort, I can even create products that retain their will and memories, virtually indistinguishable from when they were alive, but that shortens the lifespan and requires new life to be refilled every few hours... So basically, I always adjust them to the level of these zombies, which allows them to stay fresh for a while."

Kokoro spoke while swinging her sword. After the cage was destroyed, the moving corpses shambled out.

"Also, in order to convert other people's life force—or rather, I should say blood—this component is required... I just have to pour fresh blood into here and stir the corpse, oh dear, how incredible—That's the kind of feeling. Luckily, I already created these things before the component was taken away, so I wasn't in any hurry to retrieve it. However, having it on hand is better than not—So there, it's time to let them fulfill their job of livening up the mood. Go!"

The corpses slowly approached Haruaki's group. Haruaki covered his mouth while Konoha and the others grabbed him and forced him to retreat. However, Fear remained motionless.

"Ooh... Damn it... This..."

Fear groaned and closed her eyes tight. The corpses approached her even more.

"Fear! What are you doing, hurry and back away—!"

As Haruaki yelled at Fear, a corpse's arm was reaching towards her. Shoulders trembling, Fear opened her eyes wide in that instant, turning the drill in her hand into a hatchet.

"Guh... Ahhhhhh!"

Raising the massive blade, she severed the corpse's outstretched arm at the shoulder. There was almost no bleeding. Thud, the corpse's arm fell to the ground directly as inanimate objects. Next, the other corpse also reached out. Cutting the arm off in the same manner, Fear panted and murmured:

"Damn it... This is so... sad. I've seen all sorts of corpses to this date. I've seen hundreds and thousands of corpses. But looking like this... Being forced to move even after death, I've never seen that kind of corpse before! They should be allowed... to rest in peace properly...!"

"Kaha. Then you should chop off their heads. Decapitate them viciously. Why don't you do that?"

"Th-That's... That's... because... Oooo... Oooooo.. Ooooooooooooh...!"

Come back—Kokoro whispered. Having lost an arm each, the corpses slowly shuffled their way back to her side. Next, Kokoro saw Fear's pallid face.

"Oh...? You're really afraid, is that it? Even if your opponents are corpses, you don't want to recall the sensations of killing? As much as I'd like to say you must be kidding, I've changed my mind slightly. In other words, you can't stand this because you're afraid of turning back into your old self once you recall those sensations, right? In that case, you should become even more afraid. Be more scared of the past, push yourself beyond your limits of toleration! Your attacks in the beginning, filled with rage, already displayed your natural abilities as a tool, making me feel so happy. If you can turn back into that genocidal tool completely, I'm sure I'll be treated to the greatest level of fun?"

"What...!"

I absolutely cannot allow her to do that, Haruaki thought. Absolutely.

Hence, Haruaki tried his best to suppress his urge to vomit. There was no time for nausea right now, with many things he needed to do. In order to

protect what was precious, there was still things he must do no matter what—

He confirmed the situation. Fear was shaking, trying to suppress something just like last time when Bivorio had forced her to taste the feeling of death. Un Izoey was still lying on the ground panting, her wrist still bleeding. Zenon and Ganon were observing expressionlessly without any signs of offering assistance.

Himself, Konoha, Kuroe and Kirika. They were the only four who could still move freely.

"Konoha...!"

"A cursed sword... Sending it on its way to the afterlife is my responsibility, I suppose..."

Konoha transformed into a Japanese sword as her whispers of suppressed rage were heard. The sword's weight brought Haruaki a sense of comfort.

"I... cannot leave that dark-skinned girl unattended. I must give her treatment."

"Then I'll leave that to you. Also, it'd be nice if you could give her a punch on my behalf."

"After all, that girl is the start of everything. I'll leave my share to you as well... So, let me take care of the poor corpses, okay? It's not like we can't let Fear-kun face them. Besides, all they can do now is bite, right? Immobilizing them should be fairly simple."

With a grave expression, Kirika slowly extended the «Tragic Black River». Perhaps due to hearing her words, Kokoro deliberately spread her arms in a pose of exasperation.

"Is that so? You guys should remember... This sword has other secondary powers you've seen before. Do note that a scientist came up with this thing. This could be thought up only because he was a scientist. From his standpoint, compared to raising the dead, reviving broken machinery would be even easier. Conversely speaking—since the sword can manipulate "human life," of course it can manipulate "mechanical life" as well! So this thing can also revive broken machinery. It's even easier than resurrecting a human, and of course, it doesn't require injecting a person's life through the refilling vessel."

While speaking, Kokoro slashed at the scrap metal at the corpses' feet. Just like the time when she crafted a sword using the vending machine, the numerous mechanical parts dismantled by the sword were reborn in a new form—

"«Ceremony Dedicated to Mary, Compound Trials No.2793 and No.2794»!"

After a series of unpleasant clattering, the mechanical parts gathered on the corpses where Fear had severed the arms. Slender, twisted, inauspicious.

Finally taking form were prosthetic arms made from abandoned scrap, with neither fists to hold things nor fingers to grip objects. Instead, the arms' front ends were made of sharp mechanical parts, resembling spears in shape. A melding of human death and mechanical death.

"How far are you... going to desecrate human... dignity...!"

"Stop sweating the small stuff. Since it makes them stronger, I'm sure they're very satisfied. Kaha, monsters born from the revival of corpses and the handling of machinery. Hence, this sword has another name—«Frankenstein's Heart». Okay, come, I want to make you understand that I'm a super monster with Frankenstein-level monsters as flunkies!"

The red scarf fluttering behind her, Kokoro rushed down the mountain of scrap metal.

Naturally, the two monsters followed closely behind her.

Part 3

—The two of them kept watching. Simply standing there together, watching.

...The Draconian's Number Four as she swung the ceremonial sword, her red scarf fluttering behind her.

...The boy wielding the Japanese sword, fighting desperately.

...The girl extending her leather belt towards the corpses with the mechanical arms.

...The girl lying collapsed on the ground, her wrist all bloody.

...Kneeling beside her, the Japanese doll using her own hair to heal the girl.

...The silver-haired girl, holding a tool of torture while breathing irregularly—

"—Which side will win?"

"Who knows?"

The elder sister replied concisely. Indeed, no idea—Hyoujou Zenon thought. At the same time, only now did she realize she was clenching her fist tight. So was her sister. No idea. However, there was currently no need to ponder that question. This was nothing more than a completely meaningless wish.

What they needed to do was prepare. In order not to miss the opportunity, they had to prepare as much as possible to take the appropriate action when the right time arrived.

In other words, sure enough—

All they could do was continue observing this scene.

Nevertheless, an even more meaningless wish compelled Zenon to move her lips. Just as before, she asked her sister beside her.

"That boy... Those girls... Will they forgive us?"

The sister's answer was, sure enough—

"...Who knows?"

...Still exactly the same as just now.

Part 4

Bold.

Kokoro Pentangeli's fighting style was captured completely by that one word. Advancing boldly. Thrusting boldly. Slashing boldly. With Konoha's assistance, Haruaki desperately blocked these attacks. Naturally, he would also counterattack whenever there was a chance. Despite remaining in its

scabbard, a sword was still a sword. Given sufficient force, lacerations beyond bruises could be inflicted. However—

Kokoro's boldness was not without reason. She was neither concerned about minor openings nor minor counterattacks. This was all because of the red curse she was wearing.

The black scabbard struck her flank, producing a sensation of bones cracking. Were the bones simply cracked? Or did they fracture? The wound inflicted at that location could not be confirmed, not because it was situated beneath clothing, but actually because of the opposite.

"Guh... How annoying. Every time you're attacked, your body becomes more exposed. This is utterly terrible in terms of moral education...!"

"Kaha, don't sweat the small stuff! I will repair it as appropriate!"

A portion of Kokoro's red uniform suddenly vanished, exposing unharmed skin—This abnormal phenomenon had occurred many times already. Of course, Haruaki would always try his best to avert his gaze.

Several clashes and then several counterattacks later, her clothing disappeared successively from various parts of her body. While Kokoro was swinging her sword boldly from some distance away, in that instant—

"Sword-Kill—!"

"Woah!"

Just as Haruaki entered a sword drawing stance at Konoha's instruction, Kokoro stopped swinging her sword and retreated backwards. Based on the apparent situation, it was not supposed to be the right timing for withdrawing her sword... Did she possess beast-like instincts? Or was it a deduction? The right answer seemed to be both. Kokoro grinned fearlessly.

"I was thinking it's about time for you to make your move... Then lemme switch my weapon!"

Raising the ceremonial sword, she chopped at the scrap metal by her feet, reassembling in the same manner as the vending machine last time. A wreckage sword built from mechanical components stood upright from the mountain of junk. Sheathing the «Necromancy» sword, Kokoro gripped the new sword in both hands. This massive two-hander was even more enormous than the one made from the vending machine parts, almost as

tall as a human. Sharpness aside, its mass alone could cause broken bones simply in the act of blocking direct attacks from it... By the way, swinging that thing was in itself quite unbelievable.

As Kokoro swung the two-hander forcefully, Konoha managed to parry it with great difficulty. The tip of the sword, apparently a reused ship's propeller blade, struck the ground underfoot, causing an engine's remains to fly apart like splashing water. Having twisted the iron core into structural steel in the shape of spider legs, the sword then rushed up diagonally from below. Evade. Block. Evade. Block. Block. Block—

"—Counter!"

Konoha had discreetly raised her concentration. The suddenly unleashed Sword-Kill Counter destroyed the great sword of wreckage with a single hit. However, Kokoro swiftly threw the remaining hilt towards Haruaki. Using the opportunity of the sword's destruction, Konoha pulled back to create distance between Kokoro and Haruaki. As though to show off the speed of her own sword drawing in retaliation, Kokoro unsheathed the ceremonial sword at her waist and slashed the mountain of scrap metal at their feet. By the time she re-sheathed her sword again, two new wreckage swords were already born from the rubble. This time, these longswords were of a more manageable size to control.

"Next comes dual-wielding...!"

"Hmm... She must have picked this location expecting things to turn out this way. A sword that is even able to manipulate the life of machines—So long as she carries that sword in her hand, she can create replacement weapons endlessly."

"In other words, unless that source of a sword is destroyed, we'll just be stuck in this battle of attrition..."

If only someone could come to help them—Haruaki could not help but think. But he instantly rejected this idea. He could not force Fear in her current state. Kuroe was busy healing Un Izoey. Kirika was handling the corpses while protecting those two. There were no other allies, none—

"..."

In the corner of his view, Haruaki saw the pair of sisters who were still observing expressionlessly.

But Haruaki pretended not to see them, tried not to think of them as he rushed towards Kokoro again.

Humans who can't die. Resurrected humans.

That makes them just like me—Kirika thought while watching the corpses approach slowly with their mechanical arms.

"Therefore, I understand your wish... Although it really is absolutely ridiculous, I've already found my reason for staying here and I will stay here for that reason. But I won't be like you two who are serving as someone's tool, forced to exist without choice... Just like my past self."

In that case, their wish should be the same. Kirika knew that she was simply fantasizing pretentiously and understood that she might not be right, but even so, she still decided their wish for them mercilessly.

Indeed—An end to all this.

"One more time. Hey, I said don't move. I will wrap it up with my hair and bandages. Be patient."

Kirika checked out the situation behind her. Un Izoey was still lying on the ground with her bleeding wrist while her wavering gaze stared at her convulsing hand, all covered in blood. Once the wound was treated, will she be able to stand up? Can she still fight? —Who knows. Kirika only knew that she was part of the reason why Un Izoey could not stand.

(I don't regret what I did back then, but... I never expected it to end up plunging everyone into a crisis. How troubling, absolutely ridiculous...)

Kirika exhaled. In any case, now was not the time to be distracted from battle.

"The «Tragic Black River»!"

The belt of assassination extended and flew out. The method to stop the corpses could only be confirmed by testing. In any case, let's try strangling their necks—Obviously, it doesn't kill them. Crunch. The sound of bones breaking was heard from the corpses as they continued advancing. Well then, let's try stopping their footsteps. However, the corpses severed the belt using their sharp, mechanical arms.

"Tsk...!"

"Okay, basically... It's done... I'm supporting you, Kiririn! Mode: «Killing Machine Masakado»!"

Acting as ropes, Kuroe's hair tied up the corpses' bodies. However, they continued to move forward. Creak creak, they contorted their bodies forcibly, going as far as angles that no living person could duplicate, finally using their prosthetic arms to sever the hair.

"Even Kuroe-kun's hair won't work huh."

"Perhaps it's similar to the objects that Fourteen took out, strengthened in the process... But we can't give up because of that."

"Indeed. We must find a way to stop them... Let's go!"

We must deal with these corpses as quickly as possible to go support Haruaki and the others. Kirika and Kuroe worked with perfect coordination and extended their respective weapons towards the approaching corpses again.

Kirika was greatly anxious. Hurry up and stop them. I must be faster. Right now, he is fighting by himself. Even wielding the Japanese sword, who knows how long he can last—

However, Kirika did not know how to kill corpses. Despite broken necks, broken legs and being pierced by Kuroe's spears of hair, the two corpses, which Kirika found similar to herself, still did not halt. No good. We can't continue to step back. Un Izoey was still lying on the ground and Kirika did not want to get too far away from Haruaki and the others.

In the end, Kirika and Kuroe's weapons alone were lacking in destructive power. What should be done? What should be done?

While agonizing over the situation, Kirika performed another meaningless attack as though trying to stall for time. At this moment, she heard a sound. Looking over in that direction—Her heart skipped a beat.

Locked in desperate struggle against Kokoro, Haruaki was sent flying in the air, crashing into the mountain of scrap metal.

Part 5

A loud sound was heard, but it seemed as though it had happened faraway in a distant world. It sounded like random noise completely devoid of any meaning. Currently, there was only one sensation that was meaningful.

Her hand felt burning hot.

Seeing the night sky, Un Izoey finally realized she was lying on ground. Lifting her burning hand, her wrist was in so much pain it felt as though it had suffered thousands of cuts. Whatever. Somehow, cloth resembling bandages were already wrapped over it. Whatever.

All she looked at was her hand.

Defiled by the red of fresh blood, a state that used to be absolutely forbidden for this hand.

Faced with that unpleasant sensation, that taboo, she shuddered. Nauseating. Her heart was beating violent and her body felt like exploding. Unable to breathe. Just like a few days ago, even more than before, the unpleasant feeling in the depths of her mind was trembling.

The enemy had reproduced the curse.

She was cursed. She had committed taboo. Recalled. She recalled the curse, hence the trembling. Once cursed, was she herself any longer? Unclear. Hence, she could not move her body. This body, which did not belong to her perhaps, did not move. Unwilling to move.

Hence she lost.

She shut her eyes but the curse could not be lifted. Her twitching hand seemed like another organism. Contemptible. Bathed in fresh blood, the convulsing flesh was like a hunted beast. Hunted beasts were going to die and get eaten.

How should she escape from here? What should she do to return to being a hunter instead of a wild beast?

She did not know the answers.

Without even the strength to open her eyes, without even the strength to stand up—She thought.

Ahhh.

Within this world—There really are too many unknowns, Lab Chief.

Part 6

In the instant Haruaki blocked the wreckage sword, trying to parry it, his legs convulsed ominously, his muscles having reached their limits already. Keenly discerning this fact, Konoha moved Haruaki's body forcibly. Fearing that a severe injury could result from blocking the attack recklessly, she took initiative in abandoning the contest of strength, choosing to jump away instead. Absorbing the entire impact, Haruaki's body was blown away several meters away, crashing violently into the mountain of scrap metal with his shoulder.

"H-Haruaki-kun, are you okay!?"

"Woah... Ouch ouch... I-I'm okay."

Haruaki checked out his condition. Scrapes, bruises, minor cuts. Nothing serious. However, upon finding the sharp end of a metal pipe mere inches from his head, he could not help but shudder.

Then even more terrifying was—

Kokoro had approached Fear.

"...Ooh... H-Huff..."

"I'm back. What's the matter, you still feel like puking? So afraid you're about to wet yourself? No problem, I don't sweat the small stuff. Therefore, yes... It's about time to start the surgical operation!"

Kokoro started walking again, holding up a wreckage sword she had created earlier. Fear's silver hair quivered.

"Ooh—Ahhhhhh!"

Perhaps driven by survival instincts, Fear swung her hatchet in a haphazard manner.

Kokoro neither dodged nor blocked.

Thud! An unfamiliar sound was heard. The blade buried itself into Kokoro's shoulder. Judging from the depth—the collarbone was completely sliced through, wasn't it?

"Wha..."

"Cough... Kaha, this is special service. You're just a step away, right? See, the wound will heal so I won't die. Don't worry, so just enjoy yourself as much as you want..."

Kokoro spoke as sweat appeared on her brow. Given such a wound, it must still hurt quite severely. In contrast to her calm expression, her clothing's area of fabric was gradually decreasing. Even so, she did not budge. Not only that, but she also reached out with her free hand. Placing it on the back of the axe blade that was buried in her shoulder, she pressed down, moving the hatchet as though it were a saw.

"Uwaha, kahahaha, ouch! Ouch ouch ouch! How's that? Hurry up and recall your past, then become strong enough to let me enjoy myself even more!"

"S-Stop it... Stop it... Stop it—!"

"No I won't! Look look, this is flesh! This is bone! This is the inside of the enemy's body, a human body you can toy with as you please! You used to toy with humans in this manner all the time, right? Hurry up and recall it, look, hurry!"

She's mad—Haruaki thought. In the past, Bivorio had also done absolutely terrible things. However, that was because she believed that Fear would only be truly happy by returning to her past self. But this girl here was even worse, doing it only for herself. If Fear could return to her former self and become strong, she would rejoice—That was it, nothing more than selfish pleasure in sadism.

Haruaki looked at Fear. This was a selfish and willful wish, but he could not help but pray. Don't lose, Fear, I beg you, please don't lose—!

Fear also looked at Haruaki. Instead of the hurtful behavior she was forced to engage in or Kokoro who was the one forcing her, she only looked towards Haruaki in the distance.

The hatchet, which had dismembered countless humans in the past, shook greatly. Not out of delight but surely because of the fear from recalling past screams.

Her lips, which had laughed for the blood and screams of victims in the past, opened slightly. Not out of pleasure but surely because she needed to exhale in order to suppress the urge to vomit.

Indeed. Fear was no longer her past self. Compared to her past as a tool people used for torture and execution, compared to when she first arrived, compared to times when she had lost herself to past memories, she was clearly different.

Putting in all her strength, suppressing the impulse with her entire mind and body, this was her battle.

In order to win this battle that absolutely must not be lost, Fear—

First she closed her eyes tightly—

Then she transformed the torture tool in her hand back to a Rubik's cube. The toy cube rolled and fell from Kokoro's shoulder. Finally, Fear looked at Kokoro and in a trembling voice—

She laughed.

"Moron... You seem to be having loads of fun, but I'm not happy at all. Instead of playing with you—I'd rather play with this by myself."

Haruaki knew a long time ago. Fear definitely was not going to return to the past. Hence she even went as far as to let go of the torture tool that represented herself. However—This also meant losing all the weapons with which she could use to defend herself. In order to safeguard her will, she had abandoned the protection of her body. Perhaps this was the only method remaining, but this action, in this situation with Kokoro approaching up close, was extremely dangerous—!

Kokoro stared with her eyes wide open for quite a while. Then she clicked her tongue disapprovingly with a "Tsk!"

"You must be kidding me... This is the result? Ahhh~ How utterly boring... Why did I deliberately come all the way to this remote and backward island? Had I known, I should have enjoyed myself suitably back at headquarters on Dragon Island instead, being an island as well."

Kokoro lifted up the wreckage sword. No matter how you looked at it, this was a distance too close for Fear to dodge.

Then without any hesitation at all, she thrust the sword towards Fear's chest—

Nevertheless, the sword did not manage to stab into Fear's chest.

Still lying in the same posture as when he first crashed into the mountain of scrap, Haruaki watched the scene in surprise. Blocking Kokoro's attack was neither Kirika nor Kuroe who were busy with the corpses and unable to approach, nor Un Izoey who still remained lying on the ground, looking up at the night sky.

It was someone else on scene.

Part 7

The instant she rushed forward, Hyoujou Zenon realized her mistake Too early. She should have taken action at a more decisive moment. Absolute proof that assured Kokoro would be defeated had not appeared yet. She should have waited.

But she could not wait anymore.

Of course.

Even though she had deceived them for her own goals, to her, they were still precious friends—

Acting for the sake of protecting them, Zenon whispered softly: "Will they be angry?"

Springing into action at the same time, Ganon replied in her usual tone of voice: "Who knows~?"

In that instant, Haruaki watched as Kokoro twisted her body and swung her wreckage sword in the opposite direction. After deflecting quite a number of throwing knives, she frowned in surprise.

While blocking the throwing knives, she evaded the hand that was reaching towards the scabbard at her waist and struck back with a sword swing. The opponent swiftly drew a dagger from a thigh holster and in an incomprehensibly feeble manner, proceeded to block and parry Kokoro's bold sword unsteadily—Nevertheless, she was unable to dodge Kokoro's forward kick. Striking her in the chest, the impact of the flying kick sent the person flying backwards.

"W-What is going... on...?"

What actually happened? The throwing knives had come from Zenon while the one rushing forward to attack Kokoro was Ganon. Those unsteady

movements were quite familiar... Was she the home intruder the previous night? Then the one who threw the knives to help her escape was Zenon? In other words, those two really were the home intruders last night. But why, right now—Why did they rush out at this point in time as though to help Fear?

In fact, while Zenon and Ganon were attacking Kokoro, Fear had desperately mobilized her trembling legs and retreated. At least, she succeeded in escaping from the sword's attack range.

Kokoro stared quizzically at the sisters while voicing the same doubts as Haruaki.

"What's going on? Going as far as to obstruct me... Say, was there another purpose in that action just now? You were trying to steal this ceremonial sword. Why did you do that?"

"That is because—From the very start, it was our target all along. Kokoro Pentangeli."

"Crap, I failed... However, it can't be helped. In that case, we can only try our best... Even though it's so tiring."

Zenon and Ganon rushed towards Kokoro again. Zenon threw knives while Ganon brandished her gentle swordsmanship. But ultimately, a difference in inborn strength proved decisive. As Ganon was sent flying again and caught by Zenon, the two of them rolled along the ground a certain distance.

"...I knew it already, but she really is tough to handle."

"So tiring~ I really want to relax, rest and eat Pocky right now~"

Kirika and Kuroe showed worry in their eyes as they watched, but they could not disengage from their battle with the corpses. Feeling their gazes, Haruaki asked:

"Zenon-san, Ganon-san... What is actually going on?"

"Our goal was stealing the ceremonial sword in her possession. Simply that. For this end, we lied. Although I don't think you will forgive us, please allow us to apologize to all of you... We are truly sorry."

"Our plan was pretending to be her allies to make her lower her guard, so that we can steal the sword at the best opportunity—But I guess we

misjudged the best opportunity. Sigh, can't be helped. If precious students got injured, the school physician's work will get busy and that would be so tiring..."

The two of them spoke calmly while watching Kokoro warily. They did not sound like they were lying. Despite their serious demeanor, the impression they gave off was completely different from before. There was no feeling that they were forcing themselves to remain expressionless. Before Haruaki's eyes were simply their original serious looks as usual in the superintendent's office, as usual in the infirmary.

"Why? Why do you want the sword? Which ones were lies actually? Are the tattoos real? You are indeed members of the Draconians, right? There are so many other things I want to ask you two—"

The Japanese sword in Haruaki's hand shook, asking in a slightly stiff voice. Konoha probably still could not trust them completely.

"We are truly sorry. We do not intend to hide anything from you anymore and would like to explain everything... But very unfortunately, there is no time for that right now. Once everything ends, please allow us to explain to you all? As for the consequences of deceiving you—We will gladly accept everything afterwards."

"Konoha... I think what Zenon-san and Ganon-san are saying is the truth. After all, they did save Fear. Naturally, I also have many questions for them but now is not the time."

"...Hoo~ Seriously, it can't be helped."

So the result was that the Hyoujou sisters were not their enemy. Haruaki did not know why they were compelled to deceive his side, but he was slightly relieved to know that they were still themselves. However—

"How troubling... Are you done with the talking?"

At this moment came Kokoro's voice, still as bored as ever. Stabbing the wreckage sword into the ground by her feet, she drew the ceremonial sword again.

"Jeez, wonders never cease. I don't think your dragon Wounds are fake and neither did you fail any of the Draconian's secret code phrases... Wanting to steal the «Necromancy» sword is possible, but I would never imagine in my wildest dreams that two ordinary members would think they

could defeat a «High Single» such as me, no matter how much you desired it... Too suspicious. But no matter, let's not sweat the small stuff. As much as I'm puzzled, since you tried to obstruct me, I'll simply have to kill you all. Sorry, because of all these inane things, I'm in a very bad mood now!"

With that, Kokoro swung the ceremonial sword towards the scrap metal by her side as though venting her anger. Many times, many dozens of times. As though in defiance of gravity, a shower of mechanical parts flew upwards. Just as the sound of the destructive rain ended—numerous wreckage swords appeared around her like tombstones embedded in the ground. As many as a few dozen of these Frankensteins had been created by combining dead machinery.

"Defeating weak enemies one by one is too troublesome... Let's just make this target practice!"

Clang! Kokoro reached out and grabbed the impromptu wreckage swords one after another. Violently, mustering all her strength, yet aiming accurately at her target, she threw them. The swords flew and approached with lightning speed.

"Haruaki-kun!"

Konoha instantly reacted and struck down the swords. More accurately, the scabbard was used to parry and make them deviate slightly from their course. Simply deflecting the attacks were making Haruaki's arms numb. What astounding arm strength.

Next, Kokoro picked up other wreckage swords by her feet and casually threw them. Zenon dodged with great alarm on her face. Ganon simply bit her lip and evaded using her gentle yet unerring movements while deflecting the swords' trajectories like Konoha did. Kokoro continued to throw swords continually.

"Ugh... With this... There's no way to get near her...!"

"Not good, my hand is starting to hurt... I can't carry this on for long."

"Yes, hoping for her to run out of ammunition would be foolish indeed. This location really presents her with a great advantage... This is bad!"

Without warning, Kokoro threw a wreckage sword in a completely different direction. Her target was currently displaying a shocked expression at the sight of Zenon and Ganon's entry into the fray—meanwhile, she had

exhausted her energy and stamina to resist bloodlust—Fear, sitting helplessly on the ground currently.

She had proudly adhered to her resolution to avoid getting devoured by her past again. However, this was definitely no easy task. Fear's eyes showed the intent to stand up but she could not enter the battle in her current state—The Rubik's cube remained in its original form as it rolled by her feet. All she needed to block Kokoro's incoming sword was pick up the cube and transform it into a torture tool, but was Fear able to do that in her current condition?

Fear looked up and reached for the Rubik's cube. However, before it could transform into a tool of torture and execution, the deadly wreckage sword with its irregularly shaped blade had already arrived right before her eyes—

Then—

It collided in midair with a steel pipe that had flown from the opposite direction

Flying parallel to the ground, the sword seemed frozen in time for an instant. But in the next second, it spun and flew straight up. This meant that the pipe had struck the wreckage sword's very tip in a violent collision with equal speed and power.

Currently in a desperate struggle to pin down the corpses, Kirika and Kuroe whispered in surprise.

"...What happened?"

"Oh dear, what should I say... Today is really full of surprises."

Haruaki agreed. What on earth was going on? Today was truly abnormal. All these unprecedented events, with Zenon and Ganon's matter most prominent of all.

Ahhh, but on further thought, this was perhaps only natural.

"I didn't intend to show myself originally... But that would ultimately be too selfish of me. After all, I am responsible. Responsible without a shred of doubt. Since I cannot stand aside and do nothing—Consider this the arrival of right timing."

Zenon and Ganon had acted for a certain purpose.

Their loyalties remained the same as usual, yet they were acting due to some unknown secret motive.

Their usual selves, in that case—Haruaki was certain that they were not the only two privy to their goal. Naturally, one more person should be in the know. Obviously, that would be—

"Everyone, I am truly sorry... My willfulness has caused trouble to you all. Once this is over, I will explain everything. So first of all, let me end everything here—And shut the dragon's «Jaws» firmly."

The man who had thrown the steel pipe—

The man, whose face was hidden behind a gas mask, had never spoken in such a serious tone of voice before.

Part 8

What happened? Fear could not understand. A familiar man's voice, a familiar man's appearance. Why was he here? What was he doing? Due to the bizarreness of it all, she almost felt like throwing an ashtray. Having sat down to tea countless times in that room, this was the figure who made strange laughing noises through his gas mask while happily listening to them chat.

That man and the one standing here were supposed to be the same person, but somehow she could not connect them at all. Hence, everything was total chaos.

Fear only knew one thing. Namely, what had happened to her just now.

She had been saved. Continuously resisting those shocking and ominous memories of the past had exhausted her body and mind to their limits. Taking advantage of the situation, the enemy had attacked. If that man had not thrown the pipe, the sword would have struck her directly.

However, she was currently thinking that she could not accept that rescue from the bottom of her heart. Neither could she thank him purely.

First of all, most importantly, she wanted to confirm. She wanted to confirm the answer to an important matter.

What should she do to accomplish that? Obviously—Since the answer was not in her heart, she must go out to search for it.

Fear breathed out slowly and softly, gradually regaining strength in her limbs.

She questioned his true motives. She wanted to know if he was trustworthy from her side's perspective—

Standing up, she gazed ahead to have a good and clear look.

"Th-The superintendent...?"

There was definitely no mistake. Approaching step by step was the weird man in the gas mask—Sekaibashi Gabriel. Most likely wary because her wreckage sword had been deflected, Kokoro frowned while she watched the new enemy.

As though trying to calm Haruaki's mental turmoil that was making him speechless, the superintendent raised his hand lightly.

"Oh dear, I understand. You all must have many questions for me? But we do have our own extenuating circumstances that are impossible to explain in few words... If anything, there's only one thing I currently hope for you to understand, namely, that we are still your friends and absolutely not your enemies. Being forced to deceive you actually weighs heavily on our consciences."

"...Yes..."

"Hmm, this looks like a chaotic situation. Anyway, let's regroup first. Zenon-kun, Ganon-kun, go over and assist them."

"Understood."

Zenon's throwing knife pierced the head of one of the corpses that was facing off against Kirika, instantly stopping its motions. With unsteady footsteps, Ganon slashed at the other corpse in front of Kuroe, severing its non-mechanical arm while flooring the corpse with a kick at the same time. Although the two corpses were not dead yet, at least this bought time.

Using this opportunity, Kirika and Kuroe rushed forward. Using her hair like a hammock to lift up the collapsed Un Izoey, Kuroe moved her away.

"Since your two subordinates seem to be deeply involved with cursed tools, you can't possibly be uninvolved either? Hmph, what an absolutely ridiculous truth."

"Mmm-hmm~ Due to that overly bizarre appearance, I suspected from the very beginning that you might have some kind of secret. I saw through it early on! ...Honest."

"Such unconvincing words are quite rare too. Anyway, thank goodness the two of you are okay."

"On the other hand, you guys seem to be in trouble. Ficchi, are you okay?"

"Yeah... First of all, lemme confirm something."

As Kirika and Kuroe ran back to the group, Fear also stood up with the Rubik's cube in her hand. Although her steps were not very steady, she still glared at the superintendent sharply.

"I have only one question. You guys—Are you allies?"

"We're allies."

The superintendent answered swiftly.

"But you tricked us."

"That's due to extenuating circumstances. As for what the circumstances are, I hope you'll allow us to explain later. But in summary, it's related to our past. Honatsu-san also knows our past. Since I believed that these things should not be revealed to you guys, I never explained them all this time... Although I did hesitate over the decision a number of times. Indeed, we lied and deceived you, withholding certain matters. But even so, I can swear to the heavens that we are your allies. You are our precious friends and I owe a huge favor to Honatsu-san."

At this point, Fear gazed at the superintendent face to face. Incomparably seriously, her eyes seemed to be vigilantly searching for signs of lying. There was neither doubt nor calculation. She simply stared straight at the superintendent. Without avoiding her gaze, the superintendent kept his gas mask facing her, accepting her judgment head on. After several seconds of silence—

"Since only Honatsu knows, it feels a bit unfair, but... Really? You guys are still yourselves, right... Right? In that case... Very good..."

Fear exhaled. That was definitely a sigh of relief. Although they had been deceived, they were not betrayed. Spontaneously, Haruaki thought the same thing and a sense of assurance surfaced at the same time.

Speaking of which, that Old Pops even hid things from his own son, what on earth was he thinking? His father had first introduced the superintendent to him back in elementary school. The only impression he retained was how scary the strange man looked in the gas mask. Since then, many years had passed... It would've been fine to tell me "that guy is actually this kind of person" at least, right?

Once Old Pops gets back, this adds another thing for me to complain to him about—Haruaki thought. Sighing in exasperation, Konoha spoke as though trying to lift her spirits:

"Anyway, the current situation certainly does not allow for us to inquire about the details. So, allow me to confirm our combat potential."

"My skill is knife throwing. I don't have many knives remaining, so at most, all I can do is help provide cover."

"I probably can only manage a role of providing cover~ Because I haven't been keeping up with my sword training for the past few years. That said, I almost got decapitated by a weird oar-wielding woman not too long ago, it made me realize 'Oh dear, I've grown sluggish' so I started training again... But sure enough, it's really tiring~"

"I'm quite interested in that gentle sword style of hers. Would the superintendent happen to be her master?"

"No no no, Ganon-kun is virtually self-taught in a style of her own. On the other hand, I have instructed Zenon-kun a bit. Basically directing her with some key insight while I'm not too rusty yet."

Speaking of which, Haruaki recalled witnessing the superintendent's amazing accuracy with darts in the office. Considering that along with the thrown pipe just now, he was probably a master in some kind of "throwing" skill? Then could they count the superintendent as one of their combatants? As Haruaki cast this sort of questioning gaze—

"I know what you're trying to say—But because I've suffered a major injury in the past, there's a whole load of problems with my health. Due to throwing that steel pipe by using my full strength which I haven't used for so long, my hand already ended up like this."

The superintendent extended his mildly convulsing hand, which looked so feeble it was hard to imagine the hand holding anything.

"I don't think I can throw accurate at the target the next time. It'd be terrible if I hit one of you in front, so I'm sorry, it's better if you don't count me as one of the fighters."

"I see—Anyway, I'm very thankful for just now. In other words, we have a total of six people able to fight on our side? Obviously, I'm not counting that country girl. What poor endurance."

"Clearly you were in a similar state until just now... Anyway, what about that girl on the enemy side?"

Moving the tip of her sword slightly, Kokoro remained on high alert, staring intently at the superintendent.

"...Who are you people? To strike down my sword with such disgusting accuracy... I don't think even those guys among the «High Singles» can necessarily manage that level of skill."

"Don't worry about that, it was an exceptional case. I'll be an observer from now on. How regrettable."

"It does bother me... But whatever, I won't sweat the small stuff. Even if two or three more flunkies have appeared, it's no big deal. What I need to do remains the same."

Most likely summoned by Kokoro, the corpses had returned to her side, one of them convulsing all over with Zenon's knife in its head while the other had its arm severed by Ganon's dagger. These two corpses were her subordinates. Although the numbers stood as six versus three, it did not mean they could afford to be careless—

"They're a bit damaged. Well then, let's add more to them!"

Kokoro swung the ceremonial sword towards the corpse with the knife in its head. The head went flying. Fear groaned again but Kokoro remained unfazed. Through the sword's power, nearby mechanical parts began to clang and gather noisily on the neck where the severed head had been. Finally, a head made of wreckage took form, without eyes or a nose, with only a bird-like beak for a mouth. Very considerate of her, there was even a rows of teeth inside the mouth. Next, she used her sword to touch the corpse that had lost an arm, creating another prosthesis out of

wreckage—branching out, it looked like some kind of weird spider alien. Hating spiders, Fear frowned at the sight.

"You might consider this an excuse... But I did give orders for Zenon-kun and Ganon-kun to find out the whereabouts of the abductees while pretending to be her allies. I never expected them to have died from the get-go. How utterly abhorring."

The superintendent muttered in a mournful voice as he looked at the two corpses, one with a bird's head while the other was equipped with spider-like and spear-like mechanical arms. Haruaki recalled how before the battle started, Zenon had advised Kokoro that "the sword's power is not needed." She was inconspicuously trying to prevent Kokoro's atrocities. Nevertheless, Kokoro's depravity had already far surpassed their expectations.

They absolutely must not lose to her.

"Fear, are you okay?"

"...Anyway, I must step up."

Fear clutched the toy cube and took a step forward in front of Haruaki. Ahead of her was death which had been toyed with, as well as the sadist who had toyed with death.

This was a scene she had been watching all along, as well as a scene she hoped to never see again. A scene very close to her yet very far away at the same time. Hence, that was why her heart was wavering so unpleasantly.

"Indeed... I must fight. She cannot be forgiven and I'm very angry. Now that we've cleared up the fact that Zenon and the others are allies, there's nothing left to make me afraid. Nothing at all—"

She halted at this point and only took one step.

However—She whispered. With the back of her silver-haired head still facing Haruaki, she murmured to herself:

"However—I still want to obtain some power. If something could ease the terror of this pair of bloodstained hands and prevent this throat from swallowing bait on its own... I think it'd make things better. Hey, Haruaki, do you really not have it? A certain power that could let me, cursed as I am, forget that curse temporarily?"

Haruaki did not have that kind of power.

However, he noticed it. Fear's tiny hand was subtly reaching out to him. That hand seemed to be hesitating, clenching tightly and opening repeatedly.

Hence—

Haruaki held the hand.

"You... will definitely be okay."

These words were so ambiguous and unclear. Fear remained silent. She simply gripped his hand firmly, firmly, twice, thrice.

"Hmph... Completely useless. I did read on the news that a shameless man was arrested by the police on the train simply for holding a high school girl's hand. In other words, this action of yours is indecent enough to be arrested and in perfect accordance with your style as the shameless brat. Ahhh, crap, truly too shameless, it makes me completely furious—"

Fear kept facing forward all along. Her silver hair shook slightly.

"All because of this, whether the urge to vomit or anything else, everything is suppressed... It can't be helped, I'll endure using this anger for now."

Then Fear's halted footsteps started moving again.

There was neither hesitation nor unsteadiness.



It was as though she had obtained the power to move forward again.

"M-Muuuu... Haruaki-kun! Although I've never mentioned all this time, in actual fact, you'll really help me a lot if you could grip this scabbard tightly! How should I say this? Umm—Right, it's the breathing! By feeling your pulse strongly, Haruaki-kun, breathing can be synchronized easily, which may then increase combat power probably, no wait, it will surely increase!"

"O-Oh? S-Seriously? Well then... I'll grip tighter..."

"Huwahiya!? S-Should I say that being gripped there troubles me greatly? Ahh, no good... If you use... that much force... Ah... Huff~ I-I'm energized a hundredfold...!"

For some reason, Konoha gave off an ecstatic-sounding moan and the tip of the blade quivered. Despite Haruaki's puzzlement, he really hoped it was true that Konoha would become energized a hundredfold. After all, Konoha had likewise gone hazy from Kokoro's massive bleeding earlier.

"A chance! Let me hold hands too. Wow~ It's Haru's smell~ ...Sniff sniff, muu, this smell alone is enough to go down with three bowls of rice! Hurry and summon the chef now~"

"Stop smelling me while saying such weird things! Eh, ouch! Class Rep, why did you slap my hand?"

"I-It's like a high-five or something. Nothing more, it's just to help you pull yourself together and to help me muster my courage. H-How absolutely ridiculous... Hmph!"

For some reason, Kuroe also reached out and gripped Haruaki's hand lightly a couple times before walking forward, while Kirika slapped his palm while passing by him.

"Hahaha! Haruaki-kun sure has a happy life."

"Superintendent, what are you talking about...?"

"Secret, secret. Zenon-kun and Ganon-kun, why don't you do the same as those girls?"

"Most regrettably, I have no wish to suffer those girls' resentment."

"Nyaha, what she said. Immoral love between teachers and students... I'll be arrest if it get exposed, that would be way too tiring~"

Zenon and Ganon also moved forward, following Fear and the others. Hence the war was about to begin.

Fear readied her torture tool while Kokoro started throwing wreckage swords again. Kuroe extended her hair while Kirika curled her leather belt. One of the corpses opened its mechanical jaws while the other waved its two mechanical prosthetic arms. Zenon took out knives while Ganon staggered forward.

An all-out war.

Haruaki also gripped Konoha tight and prepared to enter the fray. However—his action was halted by something tugging at his sleeve. Turning his head to look back, he was met with surprise. While being surprised, he realized his mistake.

Because speaking of an all-out war, a piece of the puzzle was still missing. That piece of puzzle was currently gazing at Haruaki with pleading eyes.

Part 9

Do you really not have it? These words entered her ear.

A certain power that could let me, cursed as I am, forget that curse temporarily?

How could something like that exist—Un Izoey thought.

Awareness of her bloodstained hands. Awareness of her cursed hands.

The power to forget all these.

How could something like that exist?

—However, if... supposing... it really did exist—

That unknown—

She really wanted to know it.

Half-opening her eyes, she could see it in her hazy field of vision.

Ahhh—She thought.

Were things that simple? Why the moon rose with a different shape every night, why the sky was blue, that was how simple it was. The delightful feeling of something that used to be completely unknown to her finally becoming known.

She knew about him. During the cultural festival, the Lab Chief had explained it to her, eliminating the unknown.

Hence, she understood. She simply needed to do the same as the other girls here.

Indeed—Although these hands were stained by the stench of blood and cursed...

The hand of the human who was absolutely immune to curses could very well wipe away that blood and curse.

Currently, she could only entrust her hopes to this possibility. Mustering all her strength, she stood up.

As she walked forward, he was looking at her with surprised eyes.

"My... wish... I request to give me the same as those girls..."

"Eh...?"

He hesitated briefly. What would happen? Perhaps the answer was no. He had no obligation to fulfill her wish. Also, there was the highly wary sword. This was a gamble with very low odds of winning.

As he looked down at the sword in his hand with a troubled expression, the sword seemed to be murmuring something. In response, he showed slight surprise then sighed as though going "can't be helped"—

"...Just once, okay."

Then turning his face away in embarrassment, he extended his hand.

"My feelings... Very thankful."

Using her physically dirty hand seemed inappropriate. Un Izoey used her lab coat to wipe the filth off her hand before holding his hand. What an incredible feeling.

(...Ahhh.)

So warm. On further thought, to this date, had she ever experienced the act of holding another person's hand like this? She could not recall it. Then it meant that she had never had the experience of holding hands with someone deliberately. The first time. This was the first time. The warmth flowed gradually from his fingertips.

"Excuse me..."

"...I give... a question of what is the matter..."

"Did you run out here all by yourself... because you thought that the incident was your fault? Because you felt responsible, you tricked Konoha and lied to prevent us from following, then you came up with the foolish idea of defeating that girl even at the cost of mutual annihilation, intending to rescue Zenon-san and Ganon-san by yourself—That's why you came here?"

Un Izoey remained silent, unsure of what to say.

As she looked back at him, her heart began to race.

Mixed with surprise, anger and some other emotions apart from that, he made an unbelievable expression.

Then he smiled.

"You're such an idiot."

This sentence was extremely difficult to understand, conveying a feeling of "unknown" that she had never seen or felt before.

"You're from the Lab Chief's Nation, which means you're not our ally and might even be our enemy, but... After living with you for a few days, I understand. You're not a bad person. So, there's no need to push yourself so hard alone. You don't need to take on everything like it's your fault, because—"

"...Because?"

"Because... Wait a sec, even I'm getting confused here now. How should I say this? ...Basically, rather than a patient or a freeloader, umm—Right, it's because we're part-timer buddies!"

"I haven't said anything all along, Haruaki-kun, but... What are you rambling about? Are you getting excited from holding hands with her~? Yet clearly you gripped me so violently just now..."

"No no, I'm not feeling excited at all! A-Anyway, that's that! Also, I can't leave those girls alone, so I'm heading over. What about you?"

He released his hand. The source of warmth left her.

However, some warmth still lingered in her palm.

This was not the sensation of a bloodstained curse.

In that case, everything was alright. Although she had no idea what lay ahead in the future, everything was alright now.

"...I go over too."

Enjoying the delightful feeling of something becoming known, she nodded at the same time. He nodded too.

"I see... Then thanks for your help. I look forward to your contributions, part-timer buddy!"

Hearing this sentence, she was reminded. She had worked at a Christmas part-time job. It was Christmas today and Fear-in-Cube had explained what Christmas was to her. Although the Japanese sword and the boy were watching with a subtle expression at the time, perhaps that explanation was a bit exaggerated.

But right now, Un Izoey's body and mind felt quite weightless. She had finally recovered from the discomfort that persisted ever since the cultural festival. Speaking of which, perhaps Fear-in-Cube's explanation was not exaggerated at all.

Yes, she was right.

—It looks like today really is a day when wishes can be granted.

Part 10

One corpse possessed mechanical arms that resembled spider legs and a spear, making it look like some sort of deformed scarecrow. Equipped with a similar spear-like arm, the other corpse had robotic jaws and might be better described as a birdman. Since both corpses moved quite sluggishly,

they should not pose too much of a threat if handled cautiously—putting aside the unpleasant feeling of destroying a corpse. But just as Fear readied her hatchet—

"Kaha! Despite clearly being so weak, you guys are not accepting your deaths very graciously!"

"Guh!?"

Kokoro picked up a wreckage sword from the ground and threw it at the girls. Fear swung her hatchet to deflect it but immediately the second and third swords came flying as well. The corpses also took this opportunity to advance. If grabbed by those corpses and immobilized, those powerfully thrown swords could get really dangerous. But if she focused on dealing with the corpses, the thrown swords would get in the way... What on earth should she do?

Just at this moment, something rushed past her side. This was a dark-skinned figure who moved with beast-like speed, running with a low stance like a beast and targeting the prey like a beast without hesitation.

The figure kept her stance low and instantly unleashed a sweeping attack at the scarecrow corpse's legs, severing the ankles. Next, she went past the flying wreckage swords with contorted movements like a gymnast. While in midair, she met gazes with Fear.

"My report: I go first. I warn first by warning that I take all credit if you relax too much."

"Wha...!"

"Hey hey, what's going on? How did she suddenly get so unbelievably agile!? So she really can do it if she puts her mind to it!"

"I treat that glory as praise for my glory—But it doesn't please me at all, okay."

Fear did not know what had happened. Just now, she had heard Un Izoey and Haruaki conversing behind her so that was probably the reason. In any case, Un Izoey had returned to the same level as exhibited during the cultural festival, completely different from the confusion and hesitation she displayed in mind and body over these past few days.

She belonged to an enemy organization. It was probably not a good thing for the enemy to become stronger, right? But for some reason—Fear felt a lot more relieved. Somewhere in her heart, she thought that.

"«Tragic Black River»... Fear-kun!"

"Mode: «Killing Machine Masakado»! Preparations complete!"

After suffering Un Izoey's attack, the scarecrow corpse had fallen on the ground, having lost its ankles. Even though it tried to get up, it was unable to overcome the disability of its severed feet. Kuroe extended her black hair that had hardened into steel wires and entangled the other corpse's mechanical arm while Kirika used her belt to ensnare the normal arm, rendering the corpse immobile.

"Poor corpse... Rest in peace!"

Un Izoey's earlier action served as a hint of inspiration. Since the corpses could not be killed, eliminating their mobility was good enough. Fear swung the axe and chopped off a leg from the immobile birdman corpse. The disgusting feeling of slicing dead flesh was transmitted through her hand. In order to forget that sensation, she swung the hatchet towards the corpse's mechanical head. Clatter—the sound of a metal block shattering could be heard as the head was sent flying into midair. The corpse shook violently, but—

"Hmm... Woah, crap!"

Perhaps as a last-ditch struggle, the corpse forcibly pulled the mechanical arm that was being bound by Kuroe. Due to the excessive force, or maybe it was self-destruction, the mechanical arm broke into two halfway through the process. Next, the corpse stabbed its broken prosthetic arm towards them—

"Fear!" "Please be more vigilant!"

Haruaki blocked the attack using the Japanese sword in his hand. Mind your own business—Thought Fear to herself as she swung the hatchet for the third time, amputating the mechanical arm. Left in quite a pathetic state, the corpse could only squirm stiffly on the ground.

"We only need to render them incapable of interfering in our fight, right? By this point, the enemy shouldn't have any leisure to reattach new mechanical parts to these corpses. As for the other one... Although it can't

walk currently, it'd be troublesome if the corpse crawled behind us unnoticed. Let's destroy the other corpse's mechanical arm first."

Just as Fear was thinking that, there was no need to do so anymore.

"Basically, we've already dealt with it."

"Indeed, the feeling is really unpleasant..."

While saying that, Ganon and Zenon approached. Fear nodded.

"Well then—the only one left is that girl. Astounding brute strength, endless creation of mechanical swords, plus clothing that provides healing... Hmph. Looks quite troublesome to handle. However—"

Fear cracked a grin. At the same time, she recalled the sentence she had heard faintly just now.

"However, I can't think of any reason why we'll lose. Our teamwork is much stronger than that girl's strength. Because we've braved hardship together before—Part-timer buddies, that's the correct saying, right?"

You heard it all? Haruaki shuddered. To think he'd go so far as to count that girl among the part-timer buddies—Fear felt a little miffed by Haruaki's kindness, but at the same time, she understood it was what made him Haruaki.

Naturally, once everything ended, she must pursue the matter properly. Unbelievable that he would hold that girl's hand so shamelessly.

Part 11

Kokoro felt incomparable joy. The kick flying from a dead angle, the lightning speed and astounding strength, the unpredictable and rapid knife—She had never witnessed such sights nor had she ever fought this kind of opponent. Ahhh, this really was, this really was—

"Kahahahaha! Joy, oh what joy! The mood has finally livened up!"

"I feel no bit of joy towards that joy... I ask trivially: or just a bit?"

"Kaha, you're pretty calm there!"

Ducking to evade the foot-wielded knife, she swung the wreckage sword at the same time. However, Un Izoey had already spun like a top to circle

over to her side. While moving, she also swapped the knife over to her left foot and performed a thrusting attack from a dead angle which Kokoro could not withdraw her sword to block in time.

—Completely flawless!

Kokoro stuck out her tongue and licked her lips, releasing the sword in her hand. Without even the time to toss it aside, she directly picked up another small sword that was stabbed in the ground in front of her, using it to block Un Izoey's knife. Un Izoey performed a back flip to distance herself while Kokoro picked up another wreckage sword to dual wield.

"Wonderful. I can finally satisfy my appetite with your current state."

"What are you talking about? I tell you this first, even in my tribe, eating human flesh is taboo."

"I don't mean literally. Didn't I mention it earlier? This «Ceremonial Sword of Necromancy»'s curse turns the owner into a state similar to a revived corpse. In other words, it requires one person's life to resurrect another's—I'll die if I don't replenish periodically using other people's lives. I decided long ago that I'll only eat the souls of people who are at least as strong as myself. I'm so happy that you're finally worthy of being my prey! What's left is just the process of cooking you properly!"

"I warn you with a warning that too stubborn with type of prey causes insufficient food. Also, beasts should know well they are beasts. Beasts that recognize hunter wrongly as prey will suffer painful lesson."

"Kaha, what audacious words!"

Then show me some skills next? —Just as Kokoro intended to attack Un Izoey again, the sound of something slicing through the air was heard.

"Showing motivation is very good... But now it's getting a bit bothersome!"

Kokoro used the small sword to deflect the throwing knife. Judging from the trajectory's source, it came from the short-haired woman with the calm and collected expression. Kill her first? Just as Kokoro's attention was drawn to her, a slovenly presence could be felt from behind.

"So tiring~ Can't I live life easier than this~?"

It was the woman with the weird swordsmanship. The sword that feigned attacks without attacking and feigned retreats without retreating—An

illusory sword. Just as the description implied, this sword skill toyed with the enemy deceptively. Although Kokoro found it quite interesting, currently, it only caused her annoyance.

Kokoro already knew how to defeat the enemy. When engaging this type of opponent in combat, excessive brute force was enough to get the job done. She pushed her shoulder towards the enemy and intentionally allowed one of her swords to be entangled, then using her freed hand, she made a fist and punched the woman in the chest, sending her flying back with a moan of pain.

Too easy. The instant Kokoro felt that something was wrong, she noticed. It was a trap. Lying on the ground, the woman waved her hand lazily in mockery. Then jumping into view with lightning speed was the silver-haired girl rushing towards her. This girl is next? Just as this thought crossed Kokoro's mind—

"«Tragic Black River»!"

"An unexpected reappearance, «Mongolian Death Worm Yoshikado»!
Followed by «Chaotic Tadamori»!"

The throwing knife, the illusory sword and even the silver-haired girl's charge were all part of the trap? Lurking in the surrounding mountain of scrap metal, the belt and the hair instantly rose up, shaking the junk away. They must have decided to spend time approaching her in secret because the usual manner would definitely result in getting severed. Too close, impossible to evade. The belt and the hair entangled Kokoro's arms from the left and the right respectively.

Not a problem. There were many ways to escape. Pull them apart with full force? Even breaking or severing her arms would be fine. After all, she could use the «Bloodstained Reginetta»'s power to recover—despite her limited stock of red cloth. Even confronted with the charging Fear-in-Cube, it would be the same. She would still be able to move even if pierced by a spear or sliced by an axe not too severely.

However, Fear halted in her steps just before reaching Kokoro. What did she intend to do at such a distance? She wouldn't be thinking of using a thrown torture tool, would she? A foolish strategy. Those kinds of things definitely lack power.

Defeating Kokoro required causing continuous damage to her until this «Bloodstained Reginetta»'s rate of healing could not keep up, until her stock of red cloth that served as its source of power was all gone.

"—You are truly a villain, Kokoro Pentangeli."

"A villain? Really? I might actually be Santa Claus, you know? I am truly capable of granting the wish of resurrecting the dead. For someone who harbors that kind of wish, I really am the Santa Claus who can offer salvation."

Kokoro answered casually while applying force through her four limbs. Fear glared further at her:

"People who harbor that kind of wish? Indeed, people's wishes come in all sorts. Those wishes, as well as the people making the wishes or the people granting wishes, not all of them are bad. For example, a man wanting to see his wife is a perfectly natural wish. But that excludes adding "even if it means raising her from the dead" to the wish. The wish itself is perfectly natural, but the means to realize it was wrong. If someone hopes for a wish to be fulfilled even if it is wrong to begin with, then that can no longer be called a wish."

"Oh? ...Then what do you call it?"

Was she being careless? Or underestimating the enemy? Kokoro wondered as she persisted in applying force. Snap, a strange sound came from her arms. One more go and Kokoro was going to escape from these bonds.

"The desire, obsession and madness in trying to fulfill a wish despite the wrong method—That already counts as a curse. The existence of that sword, cursed from those wishes, is proof of that. Hence, I absolutely cannot approve. As much as I can sympathize with the wish to resurrect someone from the dead... So long as the method is wrong, I absolutely cannot approve of it!"

Her eyes displayed completely unshakable determination, staring straight at Kokoro without any aversion. Then—

"If someone tries to use a wrong method to fulfill another person's wish, even if that person is the real Santa Claus, I will still stop him! So I'm going to stop you, just like now!"

Fear declared forcefully as she swung the drill in her hand. It did not hit. Instead, the drill's tip simply buried itself into the scrap metal heap by Kokoro's feet. However, the girl rattled the chain of cubes that was connected to the drill.

"Mechanism No.12 extinction type, revolving blade form: «Tornado of Souls»—Curse Calling!"

Immediately, it transformed into an upright pillar with countless blades on its surface. With the sound of steel turning, it began to spin like a tornado—At the same time, the resilient belt and hair entangling Kokoro's arms pushed her forward slightly. Naturally—

"Guh... Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?"

Dragged forward, Kokoro's body made contact with the killing pillar's sharp blades. The tips of the revolving blade gouged out bloody flesh, resulting in shared sensations of the clothing's ripping and the body's pain. The dual agony caused Kokoro's mind to go utterly numb. Forced to heal without a choice, yet her wounds were sliced open by the killing mechanism as soon as they closed up, resulting in ripped open flesh again, followed by healing. The «Bloodstained Reginetta»'s area was rapidly decreasing at an unprecedented rate.

However, Kokoro pondered amidst this painful suffering.

Her thoughts were mixed with anger.

While feeling annoyed by how weak the enemies were, she also thought: How naive.

"Ahhh... Naive, naive, too naive! Why show mercy, why bother judging the distance... Isn't it faster to bring this thing closer to my body and shred me directly!"

Fueled by that anger and impatience, Kokoro applied even greater force to her arms. Then—

By her own initiative, she allowed her body to be swept up in the continuously spinning tornado of blades. The sharp blades sliced even deeper wounds in her body. However, it was fine as long as she did not die on the spot. This was the easiest method to escape. While listening to their shocked gasps, Kokoro brought her restrained arms forward and used the

torture tool's spinning blades to sever the hair and the belt. Although her arms were almost sliced to pieces, it was not a problem either.

Freed of her restraints, Kokoro retreated back, all covered in blood. The «Bloodstained Reginetta»'s area was 99% consumed, all used to heal her wounds. Although she instantly became dressed in almost nothing except for underwear, she simultaneously pulled out a red cloth from the sack on her back to replenish the fabric area. The red scarf she had been wearing all this time was also consumed. Only then did the «Bloodstained Reginetta» finally return to its appearance as a red uniform.

"Kaha, what a shame. You guys failed to take full advantage of a rare opportunity—"

Halfway through her speech, Kokoro could tell from their eyes that they had not lost the will to fight yet.

It was as though they firmly believed they would win.

It was as though they were saying that they possessed reliable companions who allowed them to believe so.

Before her eyes, the killing pillar switched to the form of another torture tool.

Although the enemy had escaped from the killing pillar, Fear saw a favorable shift in the tide of battle instead. She never expected that strategy to succeed on its own to defeat the enemy completely. Furthermore, since the sack and the scarf had been used to regenerate her clothes, this meant that the enemy's healing ability had already reached a limit. The area of her current clothing was probably all she had left. Then in that case, only one thing needed to be done.

"Mechanism No.21 hanging type, hook-claw form: «Spanish Spiders», Curse Calling!"

Dangling from the stand that was connected to the chain of cubes, real chains extended in accordance to Fear's will. On the end of each of these chains were a pair of hooks in a capturing posture. Four chains with four pairs of hooks all flew at Kokoro, ensnaring her upper arms and thighs securely. Originally, this torture device was meant to hang someone beneath the stand for excruciating agony, but right now, accomplishing the task of immobilizing Kokoro was good enough already. Because—

"Tsk... I'll let you have the chance to show off. Don't get careless!"

"Understood. There's also a rule in the tribe—When eating a meal, must eat everything."

The gray-haired girl approached expressionlessly. Supporting herself on her hands, she spun her dark-skinned legs. As though imitating the killing pillar just now, she kept slashing away at Kokoro's chest at high speed with the knife wielded in her foot. Incessantly, without pause.

"Guh, k-kah... You... bitch...!"

Un Izoey's attacks were completely merciless. Each cut from the knife sliced deeply into the flesh, stabbing straight into the heart. It would not be surprising if every strike was a fatal wound. Kokoro had no choice but to keep using the «Bloodstained Reginetta» to heal herself. Nevertheless, Un Izoey continued to exhibit eyes without any emotional fluctuation, executing slicing attacks persistently, causing Kokoro's clothing to disappear progressively. Since little of her underwear had survived the ordeal of the killing pillar, Kokoro ended up with nothing but a pair of underwear on her lower body. Unbelievably shameless... Once everything is settled, I must teach the shameless brat a good lesson.

However, just as the red outfit's area was reduced to just part of a collar remaining—

"DO. NOT. UNDERESTIMATE... ME—!"

Kokoro forcibly pulled her limbs that were caught by the «Spanish Spiders», ignoring the tearing of flesh and struggled free from her restraints by force. Those wounds did not heal. Neither could they heal again.

Jumping back lightly, she pulled back and bought a few seconds to prepare a counterattack. Of course, Un Izoey pursued closely behind her and rushed forward. Using the few seconds bought by the jump, Kokoro pulled out the nearest weapon. Just as she was about to block the knife from Un Izoey's foot—

It's over—Fear thought. The one who got the true chance to perform was not Un Izoey.

The dark-skinned girl halted the stabbing motion of the knife in her foot and crouched down on the spot.

Smiling, she declared:

"Adding additional explanation of tribe's rules. Food must always be finished completely. However—sharing with trusted companions is also virtue."

Flying over Un Izoey while she was crouching, a boy appeared, wielding a Japanese sword. Before their eyes was, of course, the cornered Kokoro who had finally drawn the ceremonial sword. The Japanese sword murmured softly:

"I can see that sword already—"

Go ahead—Fear thought. Despite the sword being the target of the superintendent's faction, they seemed to be approving of what was about to happen.

Yes, that thing is not needed.

Even if it could raise someone from the dead. Even if it could fulfill a wish one really hoped would come true.

But if it required another person's life in exchange—Fear did not want that.

Hence, that thing was simply—

A cursed sword that must be destroyed.

"—«Sword-Kill Counter»!"

The impact was heard, serving as proof that new scrap metal had been created in this time and place.

Sounding akin to a scream, it was the shattering and scattering noise of the evil sword's demise, the sword that toyed with human death.

Part 12

Using the force of re-sheathing, the boy swung the black scabbard that holding the white blade, striking the enemy's body hard, sending her smashing violently into the mountain of scrap metal where she lay exhausted and unable to move.

Watching this scene, exhaling forcefully—

What was this mood? Un Izoey secretly wondered.

She was in unbelievably high spirits. A sense of fulfillment she had never experienced in any sort of hunt. She even went as far as to feel that this incident and hunting might actually lie on opposite extremes. Warriors who had gained independence were required to hunt alone, then judged in accomplishment by how many prey they could catch.

(...Precisely because this was completely different from hunting?)

Cooperating with comrades with unity, simply for one goal.

She had almost never experienced this in her entire life to this date.

This feels—Very great. Indeed, very great. This sense of happiness was very important—She thought. Alone by herself, she could not have defeated that girl. Neither could she have shaken off the curse that was branded on these hands. Perhaps she had focused too much on being a warrior so far. Finding out about this was truly wonderful, being able to turn the unknown into known was truly wonderful—

"...Ahhh."

A thought crossed her mind. Once again, she sighed.

"What I needed to find out, perhaps... is this? Lab Chief..."

Part 13

"Phew... How troubling, at least it's over... Right?"

"Yes. The corpses have already stopped moving... Probably because the sword is destroyed."

Hearing Konoha say that, Haruaki finally relaxed his entire body. The dead were laid to rest. The sword was also destroyed. Pitiful corpses were never going to be used as tools again. Kokoro had also suffered fairly serious wounds without any remaining cloth to heal her. Even if she stood up again, Fear and the others should be able to knock her down with ease.

"Ugh. Once I relax, my body feels so uncomfortable... I've seen too much blood for today..."

"Are you alright? Uh... Do you need to change back to human form so that you can lie down and rest...? But if staying in your original form is more comfortable, that's fine too."

"Right... Then I guess it's time to change back to human form..."

"Hold it right there! !! Absolutely cannot ignore this! Shameless aura!"

"Why are you trying to sound like an Indian or something? Ouch ouch!? Stop poking me suddenly in the eye! What the heck!?"

"I've realized already! Whenever Cow Tits changes back to human form, that's the most dangerous time! If I have to pretend not to see every time, I absolutely cannot accept that...!"

"Fear-kun, you've finally noticed the key point. I agree wholeheartedly... It should be better if I first tie up Yachi's wrists using the «Tragic Black River» like this, right?"

"Yeah, nice idea."

"Even you, Class Rep!?"

"Ding ding~ I've thought up an epoch-making solution to this awkward situation~ Haru, reach towards me for a bit... Then putting this on top, lift your hands..."

With Fear covering his eyes and his wrists bound by the belt, Haruaki continued to hold Konoha in his hands while Kuroe's tiny hand guided him to do who knows what. She first led the sword's tip along the ground in search of something, then lifted the sword vertically... Rustle, something soft touched the back of Haruaki's hand. He could not be sure since he was unable to see, but something was hooked by the sword's blade and hanging on the guard currently. What on earth...?

"Uwah~! Kuroe, what are you making him do!?"

"Reverse thinking. Since changing back to human form is the most dangerous moment, then just have her dressed to begin with, right?"

"Hmmmmmm... Eh... W-Wait a sec, what is going on!? How could you take advantage of my hazy state of mind... Why is my u-under...! Kyah, Haruaki-kun, this is no good! Stop touching with your fingers unbelievably!"

"EH? Umm, is this really... Uwawawa, sorry!"

Haruaki frantically stopped moving his fingers that were trying to confirm the texture. He could feel Fear pressing even harder on his eyes while he

was placing Konoha on the ground. At this moment, Un Izoey could be heard talking to Zenon.

"My question: what are they doing?"

"Exactly what you see... That's all I can answer."

"I see. I speculate this is what's called a victory ritual?"

...Of course not.

The tension gradually dissipated from the atmosphere at the scene. But as soon as Kokoro staggered up to her feet from the scrap metal pile, the mood instantly became tense again.

"Ahhh, damn it, this hurts... To think I actually lost? I haven't lost for so long..."

Just dressed, Konoha readied her karate chop. Everyone else instantly entered a battle stance in surprise. Unexpectedly, Kokoro waved her hand with disinterest.

"Don't worry, I don't want to fight anymore. Seriously, you're clearly so weak individually, but suddenly turn out so strong when unified as a group... The «Necromancy» sword was destroyed? Tsk, what a waste. Wasn't that sword your goal?"

"Yes, but—it couldn't be helped under those circumstances. Indeed... It couldn't be helped..."

The superintendent was the one who answered. With his hands in the pockets of his suit, he stared at Kokoro from behind his gas mask. Kokoro grinned in mockery.

"You really sound like you're regretting the decision. Hmph, it's all because you people deceived me that my rhythm got disrupted. Interfering due to incomprehensible reasons and making me lose. I can't forgive that. Tell me, who are you people? And for what purpose do you desire the «Necromancy» sword... Oh, I already know why. Then who do you want to resurrect?"

Everyone in Haruaki's group gulped and looked at the superintendent. Indeed, that was obviously the case. Zenon and Ganon narrowed their

eyes as though in mourning. The superintendent's face was hidden behind the gas mask and could not be discerned.

"So, before that, I have a small question. Can that sword really bring the dead back to life?"

"Didn't you see it just now? Of course it can. It even works for a corpse that had turned into a skeleton, as long as you put in several people's worth of life. So, a woman, right? Child? Parent? Friend? Or—"

Perhaps it was Haruaki's imagination, but he felt hesitation in the profile of the superintendent's face. Hesitation regarding whether he should answer.

"...It's absolutely clear that asking is completely meaningless..."

Nevertheless, he seemed compelled to ask, as though he could no longer suppress the urge to speak. Interrupting Kokoro, the superintendent asked:

"—So, can it resurrect a Wathe that's already dead?"

Time froze. Haruaki's group remained motionless. No one could move at all.

Just like Haruaki's group, Kokoro also froze. But after several seconds of silence, she seemed to realize something, finally breaking out in giggles by herself.

"Kaha. I see I see. So that's what this is about. Very unfortunately... That's impossible. If that's your goal, then you've got the wrong target from the very start. That said, I can understand why you would consider that possibility. Although that sword can bring humans back to life and reassemble machinery, it is powerless regarding the deaths of humanoid Wathes."

"—Really?"

"Indeed. You think I've never considered reviving broken Wathes that used to be very strong? That's much more useful than controlling human corpses which are very weak, right? Because I've actually tried it before, I can safely assert this... But it's only natural. After all, humanoid Wathes are existences counter to common logic in the first place. They are not supposed to exist in this world originally. Neither humans nor tools, they are half-baked existences. We can't help that. Furthermore, the fact that

they cannot serve as nourishment for the «Necromancy» sword indicates that the sword never regarded them as living to begin with."

"..."

Fear bit her lower lip hard. Counter to common logic. Not supposed to exist in this world. Half-baked.

Before she could regain her senses and say something, Haruaki was already holding her hand. Just like earlier.

This should be faster, thought Haruaki. He wanted to tell her: Even if that were true, it's fine for you to exist. He wanted to tell her: No doubt about this.

His thoughts must have reached her, because Fear gripped his hand firmly in return.

"Really? Then from the start, this was a wish that was impossible to fulfill? Ahhh, Fear-kun was right just now—Using a wrong method to fulfill a wish, that in itself is probably wrong already..."

The superintendent muttered softly as he nodded, sorrowfully but seemingly with a hint of relief.

At this point, Kokoro's shook even harder with laughter.

"However—this finally allows me to figure it out. I remember now. Now that you mention it, I've heard about it before. Kaha, kahaha! With this, I can understand now. I can also understand why those two would have Wounds of the dragon. Hey, since I already know, it makes no difference, right? Let me confirm it—Show me your real face."

The superintendent remained silent for quite a while. Finally, his shoulders shook lightly.

"Although I'm not obliged to show you... I am to them. Because we've agreed to explain things properly after everything is settled."

Hence, for the first time since Haruaki met him many years ago, the gas mask which had always concealed his face—

Was taken off.

Beneath the dim moonlight, the superintendent's bangs fluttered in the wind, obscuring the top half of his face.

Hence, his facial features and expression were not too clear.

Be that as it may, what was visible was—visible between the gaps in the fluttering bangs—

Branded upon his face—A tattoo resembling a dragon's «Eye».

"Kahaha! Just as expected! The previous «Eye»! The former «Blaze» No.2! Nicknamed the «Yellow Belly»! I've heard that you've done many great things in the past, before I joined the Draconians, right? I've heard about it: how you rebelled against the Commander because your Wathe died then you escaped from the Draconians—Traitor!"

"Yes, that's basically it. Since it's been so long since I last took it off, I can't relax without it. Please allow me to put the mask back on."

Saying that lightly, he sighed and wore the gas mask again.

Both his usual self yet completely different at the same time, the superintendent silently turned to face Haruaki's group.

"So, I think you guys still have many questions for me, right? But to be honest, I think this chilly and troublesome place isn't really suited to discussing those matters. Also, explaining everything might take quite a lot of time."

"B-But..."

"Yes, but it's natural that you may find my words hard to accept in this kind of situation. However, if you're willing to indulge my willful suggestion—I'll allow you to ask one final question. Then could we please adjourn at that point? After that, all sorts of things need to be handled for the aftermath, followed by some catching up on sleep... Right, then we continue as usual, drinking in the office while we chat, how's that?"

Since the man in front of them suggested it, that's fine too—Haruaki thought. Hence, he accepted the suggestion and tried to raise the final question that he was most curious about.

"Superintendent... Umm... Why... do you want to resurrect a cursed tool that's already dead...?"

The answer was very simple and extremely brief as well.

"Naturally, because I love her."

Epilogue

Part 1

Several hours passed after the battle. December 25. After eleven in the morning.

Haruaki's group showed up at the superintendent's office. The school was still on holiday, so naturally, they were dressed in casual clothing. After the battle, they had gone home for a nap. Despite the lingering fatigue, the drowsiness was reduced substantially. In order to handle the aftermath, Zenon must have stayed up all night without sleeping. Nevertheless, she maintained her usual expression of calmness and served them tea without a single sign of yawning.

Handling the aftermath. To be more accurate, they were not sure how things were handled exactly. There were four corpses remaining as well as the culprit who had created those corpses. The superintendent had made three promises to Haruaki's side. First of all, the victims would be returned to their families. Secondly, the culprit would be punished accordingly. Third of all, the media would be barred from the case. As expected, the superintendent really did know people in the media and the police, right? He apparently intended to use these connections to resolve the incident. Concretely, what kind of punishment was Kokoro going to be dealt? In accordance with Japanese laws? Or foreign laws? Or not according to legal systems? How were things going to be explained to the victims' families? Haruaki and his friends did not know any of that. One day, should a chance arise, they would surely find out exactly.

"Hello, thank you for waiting."

While they were drinking tea on the sofa, the superintendent entered the room, wearing a gas mask as usual. He turned his head lightly to confirm the people present in the room. Haruaki, Fear, Konoha, Kuroe and Kirika. Un Izoey was absent. After accomplishing her goal of "handing the letter to the superintendent," she had conversed briefly with the superintendent once he read the contents. Finally, she expressed her thanks towards Haruaki and the others for taking care of her, bowed and proceeded to disappear in the darkness of the night. Presumably, she returned to the Lab Chief's Nation's headquarters having completed her mission.

Naturally, Zenon was also present in the office. Seeing her, the superintendent tilted his head in puzzlement.

"Oh my, where's Ganon-kun?"

"I am truly sorry. She seems to be still sleeping in the infirmary. Should I go wake her up?"

"No... It shouldn't be necessary. I think she'll fall asleep while standing if you force her to get up and come here."

"Understood."

Zenon poured a cup of tea for the superintendent while he sat in his usual spot before his desk. Exhaling in exhaustion, he sipped his tea through a straw as usual.

Fear watched him skeptically:

"If you're wearing the mask to hide the Wound, isn't it fine to take it off now? There's no need to force yourself."

"Yes, that's true but I did mention earlier, right? I've already gotten so used to it that I can't relax when I'm not wearing it... Besides, I didn't intend to take off my mask in front of others in the first place."

"So—" The superintendent put down his teacup and placed both hands on the desk—

Then he bowed his head deeply.

"First of all... I must apologize to you all from the bottom of my heart. I've caused trouble for you. Also—I know this is a willful request too, but if possible, please don't hate Zenon-kun or Ganon-kun. I am the one who issued orders to them. I am solely to blame."

"By this point, we don't want to blame anyone anymore. I just... want to know the truth."

Arms crossed, Fear turned her gaze towards him. Haruaki nodded and everyone else did the same.

"Well said... Then regarding this incident, let's explain from the beginning in sequence. For you guys, it probably started with your discovery of Un Izoey... But for us, it was slightly earlier. Probably the day before Kokoro Pentangeli attacked her. A certain person provided information to us, but because I was actually out of the country, Zenon-kun was the one who picked up the call."

"A certain person?"

"Namely, Yamimagari Pakuaki."

"...!"

The color of Kirika's face instantly changed dramatically. Haruaki and the rest were also greatly surprised. Not only Un Izoey but also that man were related to this incident?

But the superintendent raised a hand lightly and continued to talk:

"No, although I have no intention of defending him, I must clarify that he has no direct connection to this incident. All he did was provide information to me and create an opportunity, that's all. As for why he would do that—I can hazard a guess, but let's put that aside for now. Anyway, this was what he said: a member of the Draconians will be visiting this town. Furthermore, that person possesses an item that might possibly fulfill my wish."

"Basically... that sword?"

"Yes. By the way, he also supplied some basic info such as when the enemy invokes the power, apparently another person's life is needed as fuel. I have no idea how he obtained details about that sword or how he found out about the secrets of someone like me who hides his face behind this mask all the time—namely, that I am a deserter from the Draconians and what my goal is. Or perhaps this is a lesson not to underestimate the intelligence gathering abilities of an organization whose mission is 'conquering the unknown.' In any case, he simply gave me this information on his own. After learning of this from Zenon-kun, of course I could not ignore it. Hence, I asked the two of them to act on my behalf before my return to Japan."

"Then we discovered where that girl was lurking in this town. Claiming to be members of the Draconians, we made contact with her. Under the pretext of wishing to observe a «High Single»'s battle first hand to further our training, we offered our services should she require any assistance. That was not long after her first battle with Un Izoey—Right then, we found out that her «Sword» was currently in an incomplete state. Almost at the same time, Yachi-sama phoned me, thereby informing me that Un Izoey was currently under Yachi-sama's protection and that the sword's missing component, the cube, was in your possession."

"I contacted you in hopes of handing Un Izoey's letter over to your side. Now that you mention it, I recall mentioning it to you."

Haruaki muttered softly after listening to Zenon's explanation. Konoha frowned as she drank her tea.

"Although I have many things to say... Let's leave it for later. Please continue with your explanation."

"Yeah~ Why does it feel like things are getting more and more complicated?"

Nodding in acknowledgement of Kuroe's head-tilted puzzlement, the superintendent continued:

"Indeed, things became very complicated. Of course, our goal was simply 'obtaining the sword and the cube while neither opposing nor assisting your group.' Kokoro Pentangeli is quite strong and formidable so I was thinking that it was probably impossible to take her sword by force in a direct confrontation using Zenon-kun and Ganon-kun alone. Hence, in the end I chose to have them pretend to be her comrades and steal the cube back first from you guys, then find an opportunity to seize the restored sword. Actually, even if we left things alone, she would most likely attack you guys to retrieve the cube? But under those circumstances, the sword might end up getting destroyed by you guys—or more accurately, by Konoha-kun."

"So her knowing about the «Counter» is due to this huh..."

"I am truly sorry. Onee-sama and I were the ones who leaked the information. Naturally, I should get Onee-sama to come here and apologize properly to you all as well... In fact, we also did many unfair things to you. On the day we visited Yachi-sama's home to pick up the letter, Onee-sama expressed a wish to explore your home, which was in hope of finding the cube. Attacking Un Izoey in the middle of the night was, of course, for the sake of stealing the cube as well. Further to that—Agreeing to help out with your part-time job was also to use the changing opportunity to facilitate searching for the cube."

"Well... It doesn't matter anymore. If she apologizes to us in a sleepy-eyed, swaying state, it'll just end up making us more angry."

"Once again, I emphasize this. We are truly sorry. Should an opportunity arise in the future, we will definitely compensate you."

"The one who needs to apologize most is still me. Sorry—perhaps I don't even have the right to apologize... Everything was planned with the worst case scenario in mind. Although we mentioned finding an opportunity to steal the sword, even getting a chance was very difficult. Hence, I was thinking the only chance might come up if Kokoro Pentangeli were fully engaged in a fight with you guys—which is why I asked them to carry out the fake hostage plan."

"Hmph. Now that I think about back then, we could have suggested to exchange the cube for Zenon and Ganon on the spot, right? Why deliberately wait a day?"

"That was Kokoro Pentangeli's request. For us, of course we hoped for the exchange to take place as soon as possible, but we could not let her realize that our goal was 'stealing the sword once it became complete'... Hence, when we suggested that with us as hostages, two birds could be killed with one stone by retrieving the cube and making her opponents stronger at the same time, she said 'waiting a day will be even more effective.' We had no choice but to accept. Since her mindset was that she could wait until the enemies were defeated before taking the cube back, from her point of view, the most important thing was delaying the time to maximize the anger and anxiety experienced by Fear-sama and the others."

"Then after that, it's just as you all know already. Zenon-kun and Ganon-kun did not succeed in finding an opportunity to steal the sword. On the other hand, I hastily returned to Japan and hurried over to the scene."

"...If you weren't trying to protect us, you might have seized possession of the sword already."

"As much as we wanted to obtain the sword, we had no intention of ignoring your crisis for the sake of achieving our goal... Perhaps this sounds like making excuses. In any case, it's all over already."

Thud—The sound of a teacup being placed on the tray. Konoha looked up, her eyes incomparably serious.

"I basically understand what happened already. But there's one thing I can't comprehend."

"...I thought so too."

"Although you just said that you were neither going to oppose nor assist us... But what's the problem with assisting us? Couldn't you have told us everything from the beginning?"

"That's right. If you did that, a lot more could have been accomplished... I must say that your approach was truly and absolutely ridiculous in how convoluted it went. Why did you have to deceive me, Fear-kun and Yachi, to carry everything out in secret?"

Kirika also glared harshly at the superintendent with her arms crossed. Excessively sensitive about the name "Pakuaki," she seemed quite displeased starting from the point when that name was mentioned.

The superintendent crossed his hands under his chin and whispered lightly as though talking to himself:

"This is definitely because... of my ego."

"...Ego?"

Haruaki repeated the word, causing the gas mask to shake lightly as though looking at Fear and the others successively in order. Then the luxury chair made a creak as he stood up.

"In other words, egoism. In that case, I must first help you understand my past, only then can things start... Perhaps you may find it very boring, but I'll be talking about past events."

The superintendent spoke while approaching the wall where countless, mysterious objects were hanging... such as wooden masks or rusted pieces of iron. Haruaki knew that they were simply artifacts whose outer appearance suggested they were cursed. What did the superintendent want to do? As Haruaki watched in puzzlement, the superintendent moved one of the masks to the side and began to search for something on the wall back there—

"Woah..."

At the same time as surprise, Haruaki was dumbfounded at the same time. He never expected to see this kind of scene in real life.

Part of the wall opened inward like a door.

"A-A secret room...?"

As though feeling proud in response to Haruaki's question of surprise, the superintendent's shoulders shook as he turned his head back to say:

"Hoho, this is a man's dream, after all. Yes, enter quickly—It'll be fastest to let you see with your own eyes."

In any case, they got up from the sofa and followed after the superintendent.

"It's basically just as Kokoro Pentangeli said. I used to be a part of the Draconians and held some level of power and influence. Zenon-kun and Ganon-kun are the subordinates who know me from those days. By the way, ah yes, similar to the current boss and secretary relationship. Then a certain incident made me decide to cut ties with the Draconians and I escaped—At the time, I sought help from Honatsu-san. Ever since, I have lived with my face hidden as you see now."

"What was that certain incident?"

"I'm just about to explain, Fear-kun."

Behind the secret door was a long and narrow room that was not particularly big. The interior was quite dreary. In stark contrast to the chaotic state of the superintendent's office, only a single table occupied the middle of the secret room. After staring for a few seconds at the white cloth covering the table, the superintendent exhaled. Then as though resolving himself, he lifted that piece of cloth—

"Simply stated, it's because she died."

"..."

Haruaki had expected it already.

Arranged on the table were the shattered remains of some kind of tool. This prompted Haruaki to see a hallucination of a broken pot. However, the state of the object before his eyes was far more hopeless than Aiko's, impossible to repair. He could not help but understand that fact. Although the tool's original form was virtually impossible to discern, something resembling a handle could be seen. There was also a glint, suggestive of a blade. Overall, the decorations were heavy on white—Was this some sort of weapon?

"Liz... The cursed lance, the «Treasure Piercer». She was my partner and we once vowed to become strong together. Her other nickname was the «Coward's Lance»... Originally a knight's lance, a cavalry lance, but after being cursed, the gained characteristic happened to be completely contradictory. 'The further away the enemy, the greater the amplification of power'... At the same time as being a cavalry lance, she was also a throwing spear. In order to maximize her power, I devoted my entire being to honing my throwing skills."

The superintendent narrated with a nostalgic voice. Haruaki's group simply listened silently. Finally, Fear took a small breath and said:

"She was like us... A lance that could take human form?"

"Yes. Like all of you, she was extremely adorable and also—extremely gentle. Too gentle."

The superintendent reached out with his fingertip and stroked one of the fragments, as though caressing her.

"Her special characteristic was that once thrown, no matter the distance, she would automatically fly back to my side. Hence, I was able to perform long distance throws repeatedly without limit. This was the manner how we always fought opponents... But naturally, she carried a curse as well, basically when 'flying back'—The curse dictates a chance that she'll pierce the owner's body. The longer the duration of ownership, the more the curse strengthens, raising its rate of occurrence and the risk of piercing a fatal location accordingly. Of course, I had already resolved myself to accept an inevitable death by piercing at her hands. I always believed, for the sake of becoming strong, this kind of risk was necessary to shoulder."

"What a foolish curse and an even more foolish resolution."

After Konoha remarked in exasperation, the superintendent breathed as though he were laughing wryly in secret.

"I think said the same thing. However, compared to that, she tended to cry more often. As she continued to fight alongside me, as our hearts became one, as the curse grew stronger... Sometimes she pierced my leg, sometimes she pierced my arm, then after the fact, she was always weeping, crying as she said: sorry, sorry."

"..."

"Then finally, she pierced my chest because of the curse. I don't remember much about what happened after that, but according to Zenon-kun and Ganon-kun who were looking after me at the time, I was apparently wandering on the brink of death. Also because of entering that half-dead state, repercussions linger to this day. My current body is virtually unable to move."

"More accurately... At the time, I thought he was a goner. Rather than half-dead, he was on his last breaths. That was what drew our attention—Only because of that, we failed to notice and could not stop her. I regret that very much."

"Stop her...?"

Kuroe looked at Zenon in head-tilted puzzlement but she did not reply. It was as though the job of answering this question was not her responsible.

"Of course, I couldn't stop her either. Gentle Liz... too gentle of her... Because she almost killed me, she made up her mind with determination. She decided that things could not continue any longer... even to the point that she wanted to abandon the Draconian ideology. Hence, she chose death for herself. At the same time, she also did it to allow me to leave the Draconians. For this—"

A few seconds' pause.

"In order to make an attempt on the Commander's life, she challenged him to a duel and was destroyed. She clearly knew that winning was impossible, nevertheless, she still thought that things would become alright if the Commander could be killed. Even if she failed to kill him, I would resign from the Draconians on my own. That was obvious. No matter what, I was not so shameless that I could remain in the organization that killed the woman I love."

Then followed what he had mentioned just now, the superintendent added. He had contacted the man named Yachi Honatsu who seemed to be the all-knowing expert on anything related to cursed tools, withdrawn from the Draconians, with Zenon and Ganon leaving together with him—

"Hence... You've been searching all this time? For a cursed tool with the ability to bring that girl back to life."

Fear's comment prompted Haruaki to think back about the numerous objects in the superintendent's office and how the superintendent, despite

his unknown occupation, was always running about all over the world, bringing "things appearing to be cursed tools" back every time as souvenirs... There was a reason behind all that. Rather than a rich man's hobby, it turned out to be such a sad reason.

"Couldn't you have... told us in the beginning?"

"Of course, I had considered on many occasions whether or not to confess my past honestly. Like the sports festival, when I found out about Tateoka Aiko-kun's injury, the cultural festival, sending Kaidou-kun to the study gathering... Oh by the way, I only instructed Kaidou-kun on some combat techniques, so she doesn't know the details of our past. Anyway, there were many times when I was thinking, had I told you guys, I would be able to provide more help to you, but even so, I still couldn't bring it up. This is all because of my weakness and confusion, in other words... Oh, it's the same as well, all because of my ego."

The superintendent sighed as he spoke and covered the table with the white cloth once more.

"Although I think it's very pretentious of me to say this, plus I don't even know if I'm qualified, but... It's precisely because you girls have committed many past sins. Precisely because you will still continue to pursue the long and arduous path of lifting your curses, I only wish for you to focus your gaze on the glorious and bright future. I don't want you to be aware of us who had failed to realize my wish. Also, returning to the previous topic—"

This was probably the answer to the question, why did he hide things from them all this time, staying silent, wanting to take that sword from Kokoro Pentangeli?

"I admit that this is my willfulness. I also don't want you all to know that there was a way to resurrect someone only by sacrificing the lives of others. Neither do I want you to know of the filthiness of an adult like me who wants to realize my wish despite knowing of that fact."

Konoha narrowed her eyes and said:

"In other words, if you succeeded in obtaining that sword—You would use it?"

"...Depends."

A brief answer. The superintendent did not turn to face Haruaki's group again. Instead, he focused his gaze on the table that was covered by the white cloth while tapping the table's edge lightly. As though he were by someone's pillow side, as though lulling someone into peaceful sleep—A gentle act. Then his soft, murmuring whispers could be heard.

"But... Apparently it was impossible to begin with. That sword cannot resurrect cursed tools that had already died. Besides, using other people's lives in exchange for someone's revival—That method is definitely wrong. Fear-kun is very correct. If the way to realize a wish is wrong, it should not be carried out... Perhaps it's exactly what she said in the beginning."

"...That girl said the same thing?"

"Well, who knows?"

After his shoulders trembled slightly, the superintendent finally turned to face them again.

"This is all that I've hidden from you, although I don't think you will be able to accept that."

"Rubbish, who can accept this? I have one thing I must say to you—"

Arms crossed, chest puffed out...

Fear looked at the white cloth on the table and spoke:

"Basically, don't look down on others."

The superintendent nodded lightly. Then Fear continued:

"That's right, you're looking down at others too much. I will lift my curse and become like a human. This is already decided. This is how the future will be. That kind of method which sacrifices another's life? I rejected it from the start. Even after knowing about it, I don't want to use it. Also, you call this an adult's filthiness? Don't make me laugh! Before calling yourself filthy, you were already a weird freak from the first time we met already. By this point, even if I know more now, my impression of you remains unchanged! Therefore—"

Still with her arms crossed, Fear strode boldly towards the superintendent.

Looking up, she glared at the gas mask harshly.

Then she delivered a headbutt to his abdomen with a "Slam!"

"Ooph! Y-You just... happened to hit... my chest...!"

"Hey Fear, why did you suddenly use violence!?"

"Hmph!" Fear ignored Haruaki and tossed her silver hair:

"Therefore, I'll forgive you with this. Let me repeat one more time, I remain the same. You too. Even after knowing the past, you're nothing more than a gas mask freak in my eyes. So from now on, I forbid you to hide anything from us. And stop having those weird worries. That's all—Also, as compensation for making trouble for us, I demand more tea and snacks. How's that?"

Although Haruaki was very surprised by Fear's behavior, he felt that what she said was very appropriate.

The superintendent had a past, had a goal, and kept it a secret in consideration of their situation, hence ending up deceiving them. But now that he had confessed everything honestly on his own initiative, there was probably no need to deceive them anymore. No more lies. "The superintendent and his associates with an unknown past" had now become "the superintendent and his associates with a past"—Perhaps it really was that simple.

"It really can't be helped. Then let us have another cup of tea, shake hands and make up from this point onwards."

"Right... Let's hope this is the absolute end to ridiculous secretism."

"Hmm, after seeing Ficchi's move, I think I've come up with a new technique. Using my hair to seal the opponent's movements, then using the force from contracting the hair, I crash my head as a special attack... Lemme name it «Kamikaze Dive Tomomori»!"

Konoha shrugged and spoke with a resigned tone of voice. Kirika sounded exhausted while Kuroe made incomprehensible comments as she pleased just like usual. Everyone nodded independently.

The superintendent held his abdomen where he was struck and exhaled with relief. Then a light chuckle was heard—

"Thank you all... Of course, we will be responsible for preparing more, but today's stock of tea and snacks seems to have been depleted. Looks like I really should wake up Ganon-kun and order her to buy some high-class rice crackers."

Not long after that...

Back at the superintendent's office, Haruaki and friends were sipping tea leisurely. Now that the past of the superintendent and his associates was known, an especially relaxed and peaceful atmosphere hung around the place.

However—never in Haruaki's dreams did he expect this to happen now.

Inside the room, a final earth-shattering commotion appeared unexpectedly.

"Oh... It must be Ganon? She's finally back? I've been waiting for so long!"

Knock knock. Fear stood up instantly with a wide grin on her face after hearing the knocking at the door. That's so impolite of you—Before Haruaki could remind her, she ran over to greet the new arrival at the door. Then—

"...Gyowah~!?"

"Fear, what do you mean by 'gyowah~'? Are the rice crackers really that shocking... Eh, gyowah~!?"

The instant he carelessly looked over in that direction, Haruaki could not help but stand up. It was truly too unexpected. The person there was not Ganon.

"...My comment: would screaming as soon as you see someone's face be a rudeness that is too rude?"

Un Izoey had arrived, wearing this school's uniform. That was the only possible conclusion no matter how you looked. However, a few subtle alterations had been made to the uniform. Not up to standard, her top was exposing her navel in a matter-of-fact manner. The skirt was extremely short, as though trying to emphasize how long and slender her dark-skinned legs were.

"What... Y-You...!"

Kirika stood up with great alarm on her face, holding down her right arm where the «Tragic Black River» was wrapped around. Nevertheless, the superintendent was unfazed by her tension and spoke to the new arrival:



"Oh, it's you? Have you brought it?"

"My answer: yes."

Bearing the usual lack of expression on her face, Un Izoey walked into the room and handed something resembling a printout to the superintendent at his desk.

"Ah yes. Very well, looks like there are no problems."

"O-Of course there is a huge problem! Why is she here!? And dressed in the uniform as well! I-Impossible..."

Konoha stopped halfway and swallowed hard. The superintendent tilted his head nonchalantly:

"There's nothing impossible about this. She's already wearing the school uniform. It's just as you imagine... Starting from the third school term, she'll be a student here."

"W-Why?"

"The letter she delivered to me was written by Yamimagari Pakuaki. It read: 'This child needs basic education, so I entrust her to your hands.' Additionally, various information required for enrollment was attached. But because one thing was missing, I sent her back to complete the application."

"Eh? So that... was the letter... she was trying to give you all this time...?"

"Indeed. I didn't finish explaining just now, but I suspect that Yamimagari Pakuaki's goal was nothing more than this all along... Tipping me off about Kokoro Pentangeli in the first place was probably an attempt to do me a favor to some extent. He apparently told her 'you have something you should find out.' That's probably something on the level of making her get acquainted with Fear-kun and the rest of you, becoming closer."

"E-Even if it's something like that, you're not obliged to accept obediently, right!? What on earth are you thinking!?"

Thud! Kirika slammed the table hard. She looked quite incensed.

"It's very normal. As someone involved in the education business, I can't be stingy about offering a place of learning to youngsters. Also, her origins

and upbringing are quite unusual. Apart from this school, it's a problem whether any other school is willing to accept her."

"I don't want to hear these superficial excuses from you! Do note that this girl is part of the Lab Chief's Nation...!"

"Indeed. As further explanation, I explain this is related to researcher Ueno Kirika too."

"...You say... this is related to me?"

"I am substitute. Substituting for person who gave up mission and left the Lab Chief's Nation."

Kirika stared with wide-eyed astonishment. Then she frowned and glared viciously at Un Izoey.

"Oh... Speaking of which, Kiririn only came to this place because her original mission was studying in the same school as Kono-san and Haru to observe them. So that's what's meant by substitute?"

"Affirmative. No intention of harming you all. Not going to interfere in any of your behavior. Just observe."

"Yes, so that's apparently the case. So, Ueno-kun, I'd like to ask you, what kind of work have you been doing before your true identity was revealed to Haruaki-kun? Even though you probably have no wish to remember."

"Nothing much... Just observation. Observing how they lived their life each day, whether they were feeling unwell... Just this sort of meaningless and absolutely ridiculous things. No, but even so—!"

At this point, the superintendent raised one hand lightly to restrain Kirika's anger.

"I understand your anxiety and agitation. However... I also have absolutely no intention of lowering my guard towards the Lab Chief's Nation, let alone allying with them. Up to this point, do you find it acceptable?"

"...Of course."

"Then I'd like you to consider carefully... Just as I've conveyed to you through Kaidou-kun earlier, I've known about you and your partner from the start, in other words, that people from the Lab Chief's Nation are in this

school. So why didn't I do anything about it? That's because I believe that the Lab Chief's Nation is neither friend nor foe."

"It's all because you believe that... They were able to make a mess of the cultural festival. How absolutely ridiculous!"

The superintendent's mask shook lightly. While looking at Un Izoey, he spoke in a tone of voice that sounded like a warning, possibly deliberately, without lowering his wariness. It looked like these words were true.

"Oh, that incident gave me a great headache too. Although in the end it apparently turned out to be a bluff, a bomb scare really is quite unforgivable. Hence, naturally, I will devote my utmost to stop or eliminate any actions that are unfavorable to our side... Conversely, like this time, should a use arise for them, I consider them quite a valuable organization for their utility. After all, as a research agency, their intelligence gathering is top notch. If they don't want to be used, I'm sure Yamimagari Pakuaki will take action in accordance with his own style."

As though staring straight through the superintendent's face, Kirika narrowed her eyes.

"Intelligence gathering... Are you still hoping for information regarding 'Wathes able to resurrect a completely destroyed Wathe'?"

"I don't deny that I am trying to take advantage of that. But ultimately, this is simply insurance for keeping the option open for now. Naturally, I will absolutely refuse if the other side demands any of you in exchange for information. I don't think this is to your disadvantage. I'm not asking you to become close friends or to ally. This is just placing a window beside you that could be used to contact the Lab Chief's Nation. After all, we cannot rule out the possibility that the curses of «Gimestorante's Love» and the «Tragic Black River» may develop changes that we cannot grasp. Furthermore... They could very well provide certain information regarding Fear-kun's mechanisms."

"Muu, I remember that guy saying something about 'knowing things I don't know'... Is this what's known as s-stalking? Truly disgusting. Yeah, but that said, I don't really think I want to ask them for information about me."

"Right. The assumption is that something were to happen in the future... Oh right, I almost forgot. Speaking of mechanisms, Zenon-kun found this in the remains of Kokoro Pentangeli's sword."

Saying that, the superintendent took out from his breast pocket an object that no one found surprising anymore—An Indulgence Disk.

"Muu... The property of mutual attraction is feeling more and more real. Whatever, I'll take it first."

Fear accepted the black card and placed it lightly in her pocket. "Well then—" The superintendent straightened his back and looked towards Kirika.

"A bit of a tangent there. In any case, this is my opinion... What are your thoughts?"

Hoo~ Kirika took a deep breath and cast her gaze aside.

"Yachi, what do you think?"

"Oh~ Well..."

Fear, Konoha, Kuroe—as well as the superintendent's faction and Un Izoey all turned their gazes towards him. With everyone's gaze focused on him, it felt quite embarrassing. Haruaki had neither the superintendent's authority nor the knowledge to calmly assess risks and benefits. All he could base his opinion on were impressions. Whatever—Haruaki finally spoke up:

"Uh, it feels like... Well, umm... It doesn't seem to be bad... exactly..."

"Why?"

"Even if you ask me why, well..."

Un Izoey's eyes stared at him intently with no emotional fluctuation. Her gaze remained the same as usual, like when she walked out of the washroom in her panties, like when she ate breakfast with her legs wide apart, like when she worked part-time in a Santa costume.

Haruaki recalled these memories without any unpleasant feelings.

In other words, this was the reason.

"...Hmm, although I don't trust the Lab Chief's Nation, but considering this girl as a person alone... It feels like... She's not a bad person. If she were a bad person, she wouldn't have taken on all responsibility alone and challenged the enemy to a duel."

"Hmph. I knew this would happen. Absolutely ridiculous..."

Kirika frowned with displeasure while drinking the tea that was about to cool off. Then she fell silent.

"Eh? Umm, Class Rep, then the... decision is...?"

Her sharp gaze turned towards Haruaki.

"What are you talking about? I'm not the one who makes the decision. Do you think that an ordinary student has the right to question a transfer student's admittance? Since the superintendent has already agreed, there is nothing we can do."

She replied quite simply. "That said, I was originally planned to protest to the very end if you expressed objections... But just as expected. Even if it can't be helped... Sigh, how absolutely ridiculous..." Murmuring emphatically to herself, Kirika gulped down her tea as though in self-abandonment.

"Sure enough, it really turned out this way... Sigh~ To think that what was supposed to be a high school life of fantasy for two is turning more and more chaotic."

"How nice~ Chaos following chaos, I like it very much. This must be a sign from the gods, I must hurry and visit school."

"Hmph, a country girl is a country girl after all, she's never gone to school before, right? A place like school has many fun places, I know that. Since you must come no matter what, hmm, it's not like I absolutely can't share some of this joy with you... After all, with so many students in the school, it's hard for you to scheme around? Let me state for the record. This shameless brat and Kirika both belong to my class. If you value your little life, don't do anything weird."

"Answering with an answer of no such intentions."

Un Izoey seemed to breath a sigh of relief. That faint sense of assurance, was it because she had completed Yamimagari Pakuaki's orders—Or just as Fear described, she was looking forward to attending school? Impossible to tell.

"In that case, very well, you'll be fellow students starting from the third school term. You can greet one another here first."

The superintendent's words prompted Un Izoey to cast a glance across everyone.

Then she bent forward deeply—A bow of respect.

"My greeting: in your care from now on."

Then she straightened up and an extremely faint smile appeared on her expressionless face. On the other hand, stiff smiles naturally appeared on the expressionless faces of Haruaki's group.

...? Un Izoey tilted her head in puzzlement.

Her uniform was worn in a very individualistic style with her navel exposed. In other words, just like the lab coat previously, only a few of the chest buttons were fastened, hence—

The reaction force produced from the deep bow caused the buttons to easily abandon their weight-bearing mission—

Boing.

They popped open.

"Th-The long absent—Immorality Breaker (Tea Party Variant)!"

"Uwah~! The cubed sugar is stuck in my eyelid—!"

"F-Fufufu, cubed sugar is cube-shaped, right? I might be able to use them, let's try it out!"

"Wait a sec, Fear, stop it, don't say something so horrifying!"

"Muuumuu~ I knew it, she's an enemy of the Alliance! Captain Ficchi, this different colored creature is even more dangerous than Kono-san!"

"...My idea: I have no interest in binding breasts using belt. I ask question about what it is for. If this is welcome ritual, I will endure it."

"Sh-Shut up! How absolutely ridiculous!"

In all sorts of ways, what a disaster laden future lay ahead.

Part 2

Several hours after that, back in the Yachi residence...

Haruaki was in the kitchen with Konoha, together preparing a more sumptuous feast for dinner than usual. The dishes mainly consisted of food that could be shared between everyone. As thanks for working part-time, they had received a lot of cake, but it was impossible to finish on their own, hence they decided to hold a mini-party. After all, everyone was totally exhausted in mind and body during Christmas Eve last night while the daytime was occupied with listening to the superintendent's depressing past. Despite being one day late, enjoying the Christmas atmosphere for this night would be a good idea. Hence, they invited Sovereignty and Shiraho who had gone "we're free, Christmas Eve is over after all." On the other hand, Kirika made a trip home before coming over.

"Haruaki... Are you here?"

"Hmm? If you want to eat, you'll have to wait a bit. Because the feast we're making today is more time consuming than usual... Oh no, did something go wrong after inserting that..?"

After accepting the Indulgence Disk from the superintendent, they had inserted it into Fear just now. As always, Fear made all sorts of moans and other embarrassing sounds that made Haruaki go red with his heart pounding. Finally, the «Spanish Spiders» were successfully sealed. Although they had already lost count of how many had been inserted, the principles behind the Indulgence Disks were still unknown. Hence, uncomfortable side-effects were very possible.

Haruaki looked at Fear with worry.. For some reason, she looked a bit strange. Blushing slightly, squeezing her legs together and separating them repeatedly, she kept grinding her knees with each other. Did something finally happen? Just as Haruaki wondered—

"N-No. Umm... Nothing much, just like usual. I think it's a good thing. Exactly because a number of mechanisms have been sealed, exactly because of restraints, I am more able to suppress past memories... Uh, that! Anyway, that's not what I want to talk about!"

For some strange reason, Fear suddenly switched to her angry mode and roared at Haruaki. What happened?

"If not... Then what's the matter?"

"That's... I can't tell you—here. Follow me!"

"Even if you ask me to follow you... Hey, stop dragging me, I'm not done with the cooking yet!"

"Mmm mmm, meat, meat~♪ ...Oh no! To think that Haruaki-kun has been kidnapped while I was busy cooking! W-What on earth happened!?"

"Sorry Konoha, I'll be right back. I'm leaving things to you! That pot needs to be slow-cooked on a small flame, make it really mushy!"

Secretly glad that Konoha did not react in time, Fear grabbed Haruaki's wrist and forcefully dragged him to another place. Knowing that resisting her strength was futile, Haruaki decided to let her finish talking sooner so that he could get back to the cooking. Hence, Haruaki moved while being dragged constantly by her—

The destination turned out to be the storeroom of the accessory dwelling in the garden.

Pushing Haruaki inside, Fear swiftly glanced behind her. After making sure no one was following, she pulled down the storeroom's window blinds, producing a dimly lit secret room.

Fear stared at Haruaki with serious eyes. Starting from just now, she had kept one hand behind her back all this time—Was she holding something? Haruaki felt it could very well be some type of murder weapon. An ominous feeling. This was precisely the kind of murderous tension that Fear was exuding.

"...Turn around. Absolutely do not turn towards me."

The imposing intensity of her eyes and vigor was impossible to refuse. Haruaki did as told and stiffly turned his back to Fear. A purge. This was undoubtedly a purge. Too many clues... came to mind. Was it about the fully exposed dark-skinned bosom in the superintendent's office? Or maybe she was still carrying resentment from the Indulgence Disk insertion just. Because the process was inexplicably difficult this time, Haruaki had to keep pushing a great number of times. Had he known, he would have been even more gentle.

Fear's breath came closer. Haruaki gulped hard.

Next, he felt something rustling as wrapped around his neck—

"Uwah~! Y-You're going to strangle me!?"

"W-What are you suddenly getting worked up about!?"

"Sorry, I'll definitely be more gentle next time, please spare my life... Eh?"

The feeling of fluffy fabric did not belong to a rope or a wire.

This was brand-new and warm—A scarf.

"Eh? Fear, this is?"

"...For you."

Haruaki turned around, causing Fear to turn her face away, staring at the concrete floor.

"This is what I bought just now on the way home from school when I asked Kuroe to accompany me. As for the money, I used my wages from the cake shop part-time job... So it's nothing, really. That's right, nothing to be surprised about. This is just a Christmas present. After all, my position is monitoring your shamelessness so I'm like a legal guardian or something, so like a guardian, it's not strange at all for me to give you a Christmas present. But somehow, I don't want Cow Tits to know and I keep getting the feeling that Cow Tits plans on giving you a present despite strange misunderstandings, so I was thinking I had to give mine to you first."



With frightening speed, she finished talking in one breath, Indeed, on the way back from the superintendent's office, they had parted ways to buy cooking ingredients and Fear had gone off somewhere with Kuroe. The cake shopkeeper had been quite generous with their wages. No, that's not what I'm concerned about, but giving a Christmas present "like a guardian" meant that—

"Fear... You already... know about Santa Claus...?"

"You must think I'm an idiot? All I need to do is pull out my deductive powers then finding the truth is easy as pie... It's because while I was buying the scarf, I heard kids nearby talking about 'how old did you believe in Santa Claus until?'"

Rather than deductive powers, it was leaked instead. Say, isn't this gift timing absolutely last-minute!? Various cynical remarks surfaced in Haruaki's mind but he did not voice them. Surely, Fear must have took him seriously when he said that Santa Claus probably was not going to visit him, hence she decided to prepare him a present. That was why she acted so enthusiastic as soon as she heard about the part-time job.

"Umm... Sorry. I wasn't planning on deceiving or playing a trick on you..."

"Hmph, I know. The first to tell me about Santa Claus, Kuroe, already apologized... How should I say this? It seems like you guys lied to make me feel more happy, thinking it'd be better for me. Although I'm quite mad for being tricked and I'd like to say mind your own business... But whatever. It feels similar to the lies the superintendent told us. So given tonight's tasty cooking and the Christmas version of infinite rice crackers, I'll call it even."

Like the existence of Santa Claus—a lie for someone's sake, a secret. Perhaps unnecessary, when should such deception be confessed? Haruaki wondered about this difficult problem he was grappling with earlier. The superintendent and his associates had also been agonizing over the timing too. Despite intending to say it out eventually, they kept delaying. Clearly when the children had already grown resilient enough to bear the truth and could understand the parents' kind and gentle intentions.

Fear glanced sideways at him and awkwardly shrank her shoulders as she asked:

"So... So, how is it?"

"Hmm, it's very warm and comfortable. Thank you, Fear... I'm really happy."

Haruaki smiled spontaneously, never expecting to receive a present from Fear. Her kindness made him very happy. Her growth also made him very happy.

"Hmm... R-Really? Since you're making that kind of shameless face, well... Hmm, thank goodness..."

Seeing his expression, Fear relaxed her shoulders with relief. Her face red, she turned her gaze away as though trying to cover up. For a long while, she remained silent. Haruaki did not say anything either while he savored the sensations of the scarf around his neck.

Finally, Fear slowly began to pace about in the storeroom. Her vacant yet peaceful face was looking at the ceiling, the floor, the walls and the shelves where various objects were arranged.

"Oh... Somehow, I feel like I understand now."

"Understand what?"

"About Christmas."

She did not stop walking and there was faint wryness. Calm words came from her lips.

"To be honest, I was really angry about the true appearance of the person resembling Santa Claus. A festival like Christmas... should be a time for confirming the fact that people can naturally make one another smile, people are able to make other people smile, right? Clearly it's so obvious but it's an easily forgotten yet so important fact. That's what I feel."

"Maybe... I guess."

"Then conversely, like parents playing the role of Santa Claus—even for a present I can buy by spending a bit of money, if it's able to make someone smile—That means I can say I'm 'more like human' in another way, maybe... Haha, I was only thinking it'd be nice if that were true."

There was already no need to use an ambiguous word like "maybe."
Haruaki nodded and smiled because of her:

"It must be true."

"...Seriously?"

"Yes. To be honest, back when you first arrived, I would never have expected to receive such a happy surprise from you like this. Back then, the surprises I got were stuff like the washing machine almost breaking or laundry hanging on the tops of trees."

"What! S-Stop remembering things from that time or listing them out specifically! To think you'd remember stuff from that long ago, what a grudge holding guy you are! Hurry up and forget them, or else I'll curse you!"

Yes yes—Just as Haruaki smiled wryly, he suddenly remembered something important.

"Oh right, you still have my sock, right?"

"Now that you mention it, I think so. Since Christmas is already over, then—"

"No, you don't have to return it. Although Santa Claus doesn't put presents in socks in this age anymore, it counts as part of the festive atmosphere... That's right, Santa Claus uses them as markers. Then since Santa Claus forgot to come last night because he was too busy, he might very well turn up while you're sleeping tonight—Hmm, that's delaying too long. Most likely, he'll appear while you're taking a bath or having dinner."

Fear blinked repeated as though failing to understand the meaning behind his words—Then as it finally dawned upon her, she smiled radiantly.

"R-Really? He'll come?"

"Probably~ Hmm, Santa Claus is still worrying whether you'll like the present you're about to receive."

"Don't say anything stupid, I'll curse you! Since it's a Christmas present, I'll be very happy no matter what I receive! Thank you, Harua—No, Santa Claus who hasn't appeared yet!"

Fear must be speaking with full sincerity. Despite understanding that, Haruaki could not help but wonder what did she actually want the most? A furry animal? Cute clothes? Or a rice cracker combo pack? Or the right to rule the Yachi home for one day? Konoha would definitely complain, but Haruaki imagined how happy Fear would look, ordering them around to do

things. No, not that, Haruaki actually knew. He had already heard her wish a long time ago, numerous times, her greatest wish.

"I know... what you're thinking."

Without him noticing, Fear's expression had already transformed from a wide grin to a gentle smile.

"What an idiot you are. Whether lifting my curse or the matter of Aiko, these are all my wishes indeed. However, even during Christmas right now, what's the point of making those kinds of wishes? It's obvious. In this world, there exist wishes that cannot be granted immediately. Precisely because of that, people have treasure wishes that can be realized, right? Just like the present Santa Claus is going to give me..."

While speaking, Fear swayed her silver hair and slowly started to move, walking around in circles like just now—Then she stopped in front of a rack and knelt down.

"This time... Everyone got manipulated like fools due to being confronted with an excessively desired wish. Right now, I can state clearly that I don't need that sword. Using someone else's life to resurrect another person is absolutely unacceptable."

However—Fear proceeded to whisper. As though cradling a baby, she gently took out the indigo pot from the lowest level of the rack.

"—After the sword was destroyed, the superintendent breathed a sigh of relief once he found out that it cannot be used on dead tools. In fact, I felt relief too. Somewhere in the back of my heart, surely I was still considering the possibility of using the sword. Of course, I know that even if Aiko could be resurrected in that manner, she won't be happy about it."

"On this point... Everyone is the same. Although all of us believe in her survival, we still have the same worries. That's why the same thoughts crossed all our minds."

"The same? Then of course, that means I'm quite weak. I realized the unrest in my heart only after obtaining the cube. Only then I become truly aware, completely unable to ignore it."

At this moment, Fear instantly fell silent. Then as though confessing her sins in a calm tone of voice, she spoke each word slowly:

"...You guys are very strong. Despite your worries, you still continued to believe. Because I'm very weak, I'm still afraid even now. Ever since I was forced to become aware, I've felt afraid all along. So I tried hard to prevent myself from thinking. I even went as far as to avoid thinking about the possibility that Aiko could be dead, trying to turn myself into my past, ignorant self. It seemed like as soon as I lowered my guard, I would have no choice but to recognize the worst case scenario as the truth."

Haruaki recalled what Fear had said when Kokoro was taking Zenon and Ganon away. He had felt very puzzled why Fear spoke as though merely considering the possibility of Aiko's death was unforgivable. Why did she sound like she was warning herself not to think in that manner at all?

Yes, Fear was simply afraid. Afraid of that possibility. Afraid of herself who might admit the truth.

"You... are definitely much stronger than you give yourself credit for. Surely you will continue to believe. That's why you can cradle her like that right now, yes?"

"R-Really?"

Peering back furtively at Haruaki's face, Fear sounded quite powerless.

"That goes without saying. Furthermore, despite being weak, despite worrying—you've still got us. Everyone is equally weak and worried. But we're not alone. Even if I'm feeling worried, as soon as I see Konoha cleaning Aiko with a cloth... I feel like I must believe. Conversely, it's exactly the same with you, right?"

Haruaki gazed straight into her eyes while speaking confidently and emphatically to her. Hence, Fear exhaled and smiled faintly.

"What an optimistic guy. But... perhaps, you're right."

"Yes, whenever you have worries, just entrust them to me. In turn, I'll entrust mine to you when they appear."

"Fufu... In that case, let's first do some wiping now. Pass that cloth to me from over there. Although my heart is not at ease, I must continue to believe and make Aiko spotlessly clean. Perhaps you have unease as well and watching me like this, you'll continue to believe."

"Yes."

Haruaki took the cloth from the same level of the rack and handed it to Fear. While watching the back of Fear's head as she carefully wiped the indigo pot, he began to sink into deep thought.

They were all harboring the same wish. Despite not knowing if it could come true, despite the unease, they had no choice but to keep praying. This should be allowed. If anyone said it was not allowed, that would be lying.

But actually, in fact, Haruaki had no idea.

What kind of state was Aiko in right now? Was the self-repair ability possessed by cursed tools enough to slowly proceed in an "alive" state? Or had she already been fully destroyed, so they were merely piecing the fragments together forcibly, so everything was already in an "ended" state? Who knows. Rather, that was why they were praying. That was why wishing was allowed, as well as believing—

Just at this moment, Fear's hand suddenly froze while in the middle of wiping the pot.

"Nyah!"

"...Are you imitating a cat's meow? You don't really sound like one."

No answer. What happened?

Haruaki leaned forward to check out Fear's expression. Mouth half open, she was frozen on the spot, as though she had forgotten what she was doing. The cloth also slid off her palm and fluttered to the floor.

Haruaki tilted his head in greater puzzlement while Fear suddenly turned stiffly towards him with a grave expression.

"Mi... Mimimimimimi!"

"Woah, this is scary! What are you doing now, pretending to be a cicada? It's totally bizarre!"

"N-No, of course not! You moron, I'll curse you! Damn shameless brat, I'll curse you! This is critical, really critical! Lend your finger to me! Hurry and lend your finger to me! Lend it to me now! Hurry and put your finger in the crack... Inside the crack! Put it there quickly, quickly, I beg you!"

"W-What's this about?"

Fear did not listen to him at all. As though performing a headlock, she captured Haruaki's head with one arm and pressed it against her chest, meanwhile grabbing his hand firmly and using his little finger like she said—

She brought it towards the crack on the surface of the broken indigo pot.

Haruaki remembered. It should have happened on the day before yesterday, when Kirika and Un Izoey were still staying at their home. Naturally, they were cleaning Aiko in the same manner, and because dust had accumulated in this crack, Haruaki had to use his little finger to wipe it gently. He recalled how Fear had given him a vicious and unreasonable scolding back then, but right now, she was asking him to repeat the same act. What was going on? Did something happen—

Instantly, Haruaki widened his eyes. Fear was still staring at his finger that was pressed against the pot.

The same little finger used last time could no longer fit into the crack.

In other words—What on earth happened? Did his little finger become thicker in a matter of two days? Impossible. Then conversely, the only possibility was that the crack had narrowed slightly—

Fear and Haruaki looked at each other silently, staring wide-eyed in the same manner, breathing quickly in excitement in the same manner.

"F-Fear... T-T-This is..."

"I just had this kind of feeling, really, just this kind of feeling. On first glance I was still thinking, perhaps... It's too hard to notice. But... This... Truly... Definitely—"

Indeed.

No matter how slight.

No matter how insignificant.

Right this moment, they were able to declare loudly and clearly.

This pot was in currently repairing itself gradually.

In other words, Aiko was—

Still alive

"Wow~! Haruaki, you genius in playing with cracks! Good job!"

"Say whatever you want, I don't care anymore, I don't care! Seriously... It's true, right!?"

The two of them held each other's trembling hand and brought their faces together, almost touching each other's nose, exchanging mutual expressions of shock. Naturally, they each used their remaining hand to hold her. Her who was simply in deep slumber.

How much longer would it take until she reached a full recovery? How much longer still until she regained consciousness to take on human form again? Perhaps months, years, decades, no one could say. Even so—

Even so, surely, one day eventually—

"F-Fufu,ahaha. What's this? One of my wishes was fulfilled just now! Seriously... It's fulfilled, right!? To think that my unease would disappear just as I resolved to suppress that unease... Wonderful. Ahhh, Santa Claus must have visited. Not just the kind but fake Santa Claus but even the magician who drives his flying sleigh, pulled by reindeer in the sky—The true Santa Claus has visited."

Indeed. This gift that Santa Claus had delivered to them was precisely the "realizable wish" at the furthest limit.

An act that brought smiles to other's faces. The day for wishes to be realized. Something placed into the sock by the pillow side.

Hence, this was unmistakably—

"Well done, Santa Claus."

"Hmm... Hmm...? S-Shameless brat, you're leaning too close to me! Take that~!"

Suddenly discovering how close together their faces were, Fear instantly blushed bright red and frantically pushed Haruaki away. However, she immediately recovered her happily grinning face while she stroked the edge of the indigo pot she was holding, then—

"...Hurry and wake up sooner. We're waiting for you."

Whispering in a gentle voice she had never used before, she returned it to the rack.

Then Fear stood up and ran out of the storeroom with a patter of footsteps. Haruaki did not ask where she was going. He knew without needing to ask. Hence, Haruaki also stood up and chased after the lively silver hair that was swaying in happiness.

It needed no mentioning. Without exception, anyone would have done the same. Having had a first experience, a child would report to family and playmates with exuberant excitement, feeling proud and believing firmly without doubt.

Believing that one's wish had arrived.

Received for the first time, a true Christmas present—

To everyone, this would surely be such a precious treasure.

Afterword

It feels like a long-awaited return to the main series. Hello, I am Minase.

It's probably obvious from Santa Fear on the cover that this volume's theme is Christmas. Of course, entering the stage this time, we have Santa boobs / dark-skinned Santa boobs / Santa stylish boobs / etc. Due to the dark-skinned girl's return in a Santa getup, she'll be giving off slightly different vibes compared to last time. Please look forward to it~! Also, Fear and the others' Santa costumes are really wonderful with great variety. This volume also seems to come with another collection of Sasorigatame-san's beautiful sketches. Please allow me to say this: Kuroe's moustached look is damn adorable! Don't miss it, everyone.

I was originally planning on talking about my own Christmas memories but then I realized to a start that I've almost never had any touching or wonderful memories. How depressing. But I did recall one Christmas several years ago when four of us, all men, gathered to play endurance mahjong overnight for seventeen hours straight. Enduring the urge to sleep, going "hehe... what on earth are we doing...?" as we watched one another's exhausted faces while continuing our battle, these men (unpopular with the ladies)—No, in a certain sense, it was quite touching! We spent some wonderful time together!

While using this sort of optimistic and forceful spirit to recall my own Christmas memories, I steer the conversation back to this volume. Due to spoilers, I can't explain in detail, but the foreshadowing for this story was laid down a long time ago, finally coming full circle in this volume. To be honest, this is my first time laying down foreshadowing that straddles many volumes, so I can finally breathe a great sigh of relief. I am so thankful that I got to write this far into the story... This is all thanks to everyone's support. I really must thank everyone very much! C³ looks like it will keep going, so please continue your patronage!

So, one again, I've troubled various people again. Editor in charge, Kawamoto-sama, I'm really sorry for how the schedule changed...! Then there's the illustrator, Sasorigatame-sama, thank you for your beautiful illustrations as always! Also, to everyone related to this book's publishing at ASCII Media Works, thank you very much as well!

Since this volume is a bit heavy on combat, I will try out an especially peaceful mood for the next one. I will try my very best to deliver the next

volume as quickly as possible, so that everyone won't have to wait too long!

Well then, I hope to see you all again for Volume 9!

Minase Hazuki

References

1. ↑ Kotatsu(炬燵): is a low, wooden table frame covered by a futon, or heavy blanket, upon which a table top sits. Underneath is a heat source, often built into the table itself. Kotatsu are used almost exclusively in Japan, although similar devices are used elsewhere.

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